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CORBIE'S POOL

By

SUSAN MORLEY







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BY
SUSAN MORLEY,
AUTHOR OF
'AILEEN FERRERS,' 'MARGARET CHETWYND,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
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CORBIE'S POOL.



CHAPTER I.

IT was well that the need for exertion came so soon, for if Alice had had time to think and fully to realise the probable effect of what she had just heard on the whole of her future life, she would scarcely have been capable of going through the rest of the day as bravely as she did. As it was, she forced herself by a strong effort of will to appear pretty much as usual both during the walk back to the

farm and the subsequent long drive home. Madame d'Yffiniac, the only critical observer of the party, saw indeed as soon as they met that she had failed to persuade, and was puzzled by the change of mood produced by an hour of solitary reflection, for she had learned to believe her influence all-powerful with her enthusiastic young disciples. She was sufficiently annoyed by the disappointment to become silent and preoccupied, and only resolute determination on Alice's part succeeded in keeping up the unflagging general conversation which she felt to be her best protection from the certain difficulties of anything like a *tête-à-tête* with Mr. St. Aubyn.

Alice had hoped to get finally rid of all her companions when she dropped them at Clifton Grange on her way home—but Mrs. Chaloner appeared at the door to meet them, announcing that she had been over to Earns-

cliffe in the afternoon, had seen Mrs. Brandon, and had settled with her that Alice was to stay and dine and spend the evening at Clifton instead of going home.

‘You can’t refuse, Alice,’ she added, ‘for you know that when your mother is not well you can do her no possible good at this hour of the evening; and Barbe leaves us to-morrow morning, and so does Eliot.’

Alice did not attempt to refuse, for, much as she longed to be alone, she was more determined than ever, though from different motives, to keep her secret and to afford no ground for gossiping comments or surmises by any visible change in herself.

Mrs. Chaloner, aided by Madame d’Yffiniac, who hoped that Mr. St. Aubyn himself might possibly succeed where she had failed, easily made an opportunity during the evening for her brother to have

Alice to himself, and the offer, so long delayed, was made at last. It was refused decidedly enough to prevent any chance of further importunity, but as courteously and kindly as was possible; for Alice was now heartily ashamed of the part she had herself played in the matter during the past day or two, and was really sorry to be the cause of even passing mortification and annoyance to a man whom as a friend she cordially liked. At the same time she could not help being aware that the trouble would not go very deep with him (a salve to her conscience if not very flattering to her vanity), and that her own share, even in this, would be the hardest, including, as it necessarily must, the endurance of Mrs. Chaloner's resentment, of Madame d'Yffiniac's disappointment and disapprobation (clearly shown even if silent), and of her own father's outspoken anger.

It was late when Alice at last found herself at home, and she was too thoroughly worn out by that afternoon's climax to all the prolonged agitation of the three previous days to be capable of further thought on any point that night. She awoke the next morning rested and refreshed and physically herself again, but all the more acutely conscious of the full meaning of what had happened.

Recalling the whole scene over and over again and pondering on every word that had passed, she marvelled at the calmness with which Colonel Myddleton had spoken and she had listened and answered, when with each sentence all hope of happiness for either of them was more and more completely crushed in so far as their happiness depended on each other; but she was grateful to him for the rigid self-control which for the moment had not only mesmerised

her into a determination to rival it on her side, but had given her strength to succeed. Now, alone in her tower, she might break down with impunity and own to herself the full extent of her wretchedness; but to have done so then would have been to lower herself both in his eyes and in her own, as well as to give him needless pain, when he already blamed himself only too much.

Alice felt that such self-reproach was inevitable, he being what he was; but she herself deliberately and decidedly acquitted him of having behaved ill to her in any way. Fate had dealt hardly with her, with them both indeed, and *how* hardly she felt more and more clearly; but he had done nothing to embitter their parting, nothing to diminish either her respect or her affection for him. She knew that many people would blame him for keeping his marriage a secret; but she did not, for it

seemed to her that no young man could be expected to let such a story about himself become public property if he could possibly prevent it.

As to his having been selfishly thoughtless in exposing her to the chance of what had really happened, she could only feel that her peace of mind would have been in very little danger from him if he had been a self-conscious prig always on his guard lest any girl he knew should fall in love with him! She still felt quite as strongly as she had done in the first excitement of hearing it, that the full knowledge of the truth had brought her relief and consolation.

Far from wishing now that she had never seen him, she felt that she must always rejoice in having known him, even though yesterday's parting were to be final, as it must virtually be unless he should ever become assured of his wife's death.

This was an idea which could not fail to occur to Alice as a vague possibility ; but she shrank instinctively from dwelling on it. Under any circumstances it would have been horrible to her to find herself watching for and desiring the death of another person merely because it would remove an obstacle to her own happiness, and in this particular case the thought of Marion haunted her incessantly, filling her heart with pity, notwithstanding that her present suffering was a direct consequence of the culpable folly which had so completely wrecked the poor girl's own life.

That Marion's hasty flight and subsequent persistence in her self-concealment was wrong as well as foolish Alice recognised clearly enough ; but the state of mind, as she imagined it, under the influence of which each rash step had been taken, and the pride which had afterwards made it

seem irrevocable, were both what she could herself so well understand that they did not seem to her quite so unpardonable as Colonel Myddleton evidently considered them.

For the first few days after that afternoon at Brianskirk Alice and Mrs. Brandon were alone at Earnscliffe; a fortunate chance, because being her mother's companion for a great part of each day was an invaluable discipline for Alice at the present moment.

Mrs. Brandon, just recovering from the shock caused by Mrs. Carr's startling revelations, needed more than ever to be carefully guarded from anything that could agitate or distress her; and Alice, in exerting herself to the utmost to cheer and soothe her mother and to keep all anxiety from her, was unconsciously doing the best that was possible for herself also. She had, however, necessarily many hours of solitude

—more than she would have had under similar circumstances at any other time—for the rectory was certainly best left to itself for a while; and Mrs. Chaloner, feeling it to be impossible to reproach or quarrel with Alice so immediately after her recent devotion to the children, showed her disappointment at her brother's rejection merely by keeping aloof.

Alice thankfully acquiesced in this tacit censure, for she wanted to be quiet and to have time to think over all that had happened. She was as determined as ever to keep her secret; but though her object was the same, her motives now were different. Before her meeting with Colonel Myddleton she had cared only to protect her own pride, and would have been glad if possible to wound him with any weapon she could find, however little creditable to herself the use of it might be; now, her one

thought was how best to prevent any shadow of blame resting on him for his conduct to herself, and how to lighten his share of their common trouble by proving to him that she could and would bear hers well and bravely.

If she were to keep her real feelings unsuspected Alice knew that she must appear to intimate friends as well as to strangers exactly as usual, must show neither a distaste for amusement nor a craving for excitement, must seem easily and naturally busy and bright and happy; and she felt as if this would be a task almost beyond her strength unless she could give herself constant occupation and fresh interests, which would now be difficult. The plans she had previously been making to spend a great part of the winter away from home in search of amusement had lost all attraction for her; and moreover, she saw now that

even had the facts been as she had in the first instance believed them to be, no counsels could have been worse than those either of her own angry pride or of Madame d'Yffiniac's hard philosophy. She knew, without being told, what Colonel Myddleton's advice to her would have been could he have filled the part of a brotherly counsellor instead of that of the hero of the story, and his opinion was fully supported by her own conscience and judgment. She saw that the only right course for her to follow was to make the best she could of the position in which she found herself, bearing her personal trouble patiently, and devoting herself to the home duties which naturally fell to her instead of shirking them as unsatisfactory and wilfully trying to remodel her life on lines of her own choosing.

This point was quickly reached; but

when Alice went on to consider all that the keeping of such a resolution involved, she shrank from the prospect before her. Where in her home life should she find work absorbing enough to stifle morbid recollections? To tend an invalid mother and to cheer and please a busy, careworn father, both depressed by anxiety about an only son, might seem a sufficient task for any girl, but in reality it meant very little.

Mrs. Brandon had been for years accustomed to the attendance of the same devoted maid, and all that her daughter could hope to do for her was to be her companion for certain hours of the day ; comparatively few because, owing to the claims of business on her husband's time and of society on that of her children, she had grown so used to being a great deal alone that it was now almost necessary for her to be so. Alice knew that her mother

would delight in her being more at home, and when there less constantly engrossed in entertaining guests, many of whom were far from congenial to herself; but she knew also that under such circumstances the greater part of her time would be absolutely at her own disposal, and that she must if possible find some way of employing it which would tax her powers to the utmost and which she could honestly believe to be useful.

The difficulty was that there seemed to be nothing for her to do which really wanted doing, a condition by no means essential to many people, but decidedly so to Alice. All that her father had ever required of her was to dress well, keep up showy accomplishments, and cultivate 'desirable acquaintances.' This of course must still go on, however useless and uninteresting to her it might be now; but she

thought that during her brother's absence the society at Earnscliffe might be materially lessened in quantity and improved in quality even without annoying her father by what he would consider social deterioration.

To do this would, however, increase rather than diminish the leisure the employment of which so perplexed her, and which, if unemployed, would be almost more than she could bear. If her parents had been poor, so that the talents she possessed could have been turned to profitable account for them, she might have thrown herself with vehement energy into work of that sort ; but such mere amateur pottering in art and literature as had hitherto amused her would do nothing for her now ; it would, indeed, be impossible to her to put any heart into it. The establishment at Earnscliffe, both indoors and out, was on a scale far too elaborate for any meddling of

hers, and what supervision was needed was given by her father and mother themselves in their respective departments.

There was no poverty on the estate; the houses in the village as well as the outlying cottages were nearly all tenanted by prosperous families in Mr. Brandon's employment, so well looked after and cared for both by landlord and rector that, even had she been so disposed, Alice could have found no excuse for trying the common resource of pauperising a parish in the hope of restoring her own peace of mind by means of charitable excitement. A few months ago she would have found what she wanted in the education of her little cousins at the rectory, but that interest was taken from her by her uncle's marriage. She could be nothing now either to him or to the children, though for years she had been so much to both.

Restless and miserable, thinking incessantly, yet painfully conscious that she thought in a circle and to no purpose, Alice was during those first days almost stunned by the suddenness with which her life seemed as it were to have come to an end. She felt herself left alone and in the dark, surrounded by difficulties and without present help or future hope, except what she could find in the firm determination to show herself not unworthy of the love that had been given to her, and to prove to Colonel Myddleton that, guided by his influence even in silent separation, she could and would make her life what she knew that he would wish it to be; although to do so without external aid would be a hard task, and she could not expect even indirect help from anyone.

Her uncle was estranged from, her Madame d'Yffiniac had in this instance

disappointed her, and she had herself repulsed Cuthbert Vaughan's friendly overtures not over-courteously.

The first break in the clouds which had gathered so heavily on all sides was a visit on Saturday morning from Lady Elizabeth Randolph, who had only been deterred from coming sooner by reluctance to meet Alice for the first time after Colonel Myddleton's abrupt departure, and by a sensitive dread of seeming either curious or conscious about it.

Mrs. Randolph accompanied her, and the ostensible object of the visit was to make Alice fully understand that no one blamed her for Jessie's unfortunate folly, or intended to allow themselves to be influenced by Mrs. Carr's absurd caprices; though Mrs. Randolph said she had thought it right to insist on Jessie's so far deferring to her mother's wishes as to abstain for the

present from either meeting Alice or corresponding with her.

In the course of a frank discussion of all these complicated family difficulties it was impossible to avoid frequent mention of Colonel Myddleton; and Alice afterwards flattered herself that she had done her part well, and must have succeeded in proving that she could talk either of his plans or of himself with an easy interest incompatible with violent emotions of any kind.

She had succeeded, if not perfectly, yet sufficiently to puzzle her visitors, who, as they drove home, indulged in many speculations as to whether he had deserted her, or she had refused him, or there had really been nothing in it beyond a more than commonly intimate friendship.

‘I shall keep to that idea, Katharine,’ said Lady Elizabeth at last, ‘for I would rather own myself to have been a silly,

fanciful old woman than think so ill of either of my favourites as I must do if one of them had thrown the other over at the last moment.'

Mrs. Randolph was silent. She had always had an impression that some unfortunate love affair had seriously affected Roger before he went to India, and that her brother Harold had known all about it. She thought now that possibly these old memories were reasserting their power, and proving themselves, even after lying dormant for years, still too strong to allow of a new attachment, in which nevertheless he felt himself becoming entangled. This might account for his going away as he had done, though it was an explanation which would not occur to Lady Elizabeth, who had happened to see unusually little of him just at that time. But Mrs. Randolph was quite unable to satisfy herself as to the

change in Alice's manner, which was not only quite different from what it had been a few days ago, but different exactly in the way which she would have least expected under the circumstances, being perfectly self-possessed, without any apparent anxiety either to obtain information from them about Roger's movements, or to avoid hearing any that they might choose to give.

In fact, the absence of all curiosity to a certain extent betrayed Alice. Mrs. Randolph saw that it was genuine, that there was nothing she wanted to know, which in such a case must mean that she was conscious of knowing more than anyone else; and this could only be explained by supposing that Roger had taken her into his confidence as the surest and perhaps the kindest means of putting an end to a false position.

If this were so, Mrs. Randolph respected

Alice, as she had never done before, for the dignified composure with which she evidently intended to bear what must have been a severe blow.

She determined to be silent, even to Lady Elizabeth, as to this suspicion, and to do all she could to help Alice to let the whole thing blow over, exciting as little general comment and conjecture as might be.

To her own surprise she found her sympathies at last fully enlisted on Alice's behalf, and felt that it was too provoking that Roger, who was so eminently fitted for domestic life, should have thrown away such a chance of happiness for the sake of a mere sentimental remembrance of some boyish fancy.

Mrs. Randolph's own nature, however, supported by her personal experience of life, always led her to think well of her friends

and hopefully of their prospects as long as possible, and she quickly made up her mind that if her guess were correct, all would certainly come right between them in the end. She had satisfied herself that there was no truth in the reports about Mr. St. Aubyn, and therefore, when Roger should return (as he probably would do before long), having learned to know his own mind, there could be little fear but that he would find Alice still free, and that they would soon understand each other.

Alice would have been almost amused had she been aware of the happy optimism which thus arranged her future in a way so utterly incompatible with the facts of the case ; but as it was, she merely felt herself unconsciously cheered and strengthened by this friendly visit, and better able to face the trials which she knew must follow her father's return home that evening.



CHAPTER II.

MRS. BRANDON had so far recovered from her recent attack of illness as to have resumed most of the usual habits of what was always an invalid's life, and she came down to the drawing-room again for the first time late that afternoon in order that her husband might have the satisfaction of finding her there on his return home. The room was still unlighted, for Alice and her mother both liked the twilight hour, during which the dancing flames of the wood fire gradually conquered the fading daylight, and played

fitfully over the room. At last, Alice, who had been for a long time at the piano playing and singing from memory such favourite bits as she knew that her mother especially enjoyed, closed the instrument and went towards the fire.

‘ Shall I ring for lights, mother? Papa doesn’t enjoy this sort of thing as we do, you know, and he will soon be here now.’

‘ He will not mind it for a few minutes at first,’ answered Mrs. Brandon, ‘ and Morris is sure to light up every corner as soon as possible after he comes.’

Alice said no more. She understood that her mother wished that the first moments of meeting should pass in an uncertain light, and would also be rather glad that there should not be much opportunity for private conversation on family affairs until the ice had been broken by more public allusion to them.

‘How much is papa to know of all that has happened here?’ said Alice after a pause. ‘We ought to have some agreement as to that, I suppose, or our stories will differ inconveniently.’

Mrs. Brandon sighed.

‘There is no danger of that, Alice. He already knows all that I do.’

‘*All*, mother? You won’t easily make me believe that!’ cried Alice. ‘I know you much too well to have any hope of your not softening down the story.’

‘There was no occasion to describe Bertha’s manner, or to give her words in detail,’ replied Mrs. Brandon; ‘and for Laurence’s sake that scene had better be forgotten. As to what concerns us more nearly, Alice, I could not act a part and pretend not to know what I do know—not at least unless there were some very strong reason for doing so. I have told your father

that Bertha betrayed to me enough of what he had wished to save me the pain of knowing, to make me afterwards insist on your telling me the whole truth.'

Alice was glad that her mother had done this, and said so.

'I have no faith in family mysteries,' said Mrs. Brandon. 'Your father meant it kindly, I know, but I doubt if such concealments ever really lessen anybody's suffering. There is no torture like the consciousness that some trouble affecting those one loves is being kept from one's knowledge. If I could have my way there should be no secrets among us.'

Alice was glad that the arrival of her father and Cuthbert saved her from the necessity of making any answer to this. It was impossible for *her* to wish that no secret should be kept among them; she could only resolve that the fact of her having one

to keep should not even be suspected. Mr. Brandon looked ill and worn, but spoke cheerfully, seeming pleased to find his wife downstairs. He reported well of all the arrangements that had been made for Dick's long voyage, and praised Dr. Franklyn highly.

'We owe Colonel Myddleton a good deal for that recommendation,' he said. 'I saw him yesterday in London. He did not look well; but when I told him so, he said he was all right. It seems, however, that he is going abroad for the winter. It is curious how that Indian climate leaves traces.'

Mrs. Brandon said she believed that Colonel Myddleton was going for pleasure, not for health, and no one else made any remark. Alice was busy closing the piano, and might be supposed not to have heard. When she again joined the group near the fire, her father was detailing the perfections of the yacht he had bought for Dick, and

she had only to listen. Later, when her father and mother had both gone to dress for dinner, Alice lingered for a moment to speak to Cuthbert and give him necessary information and warning as to what might and what might not be said in this family crisis. A few words sufficed for this, and then she added :

‘ Papa looks dreadfully aged and shaken. Is there anything worse to hear, do you think? or is it only that he has at last realised what you and I have known so long?’

‘ I cannot tell. We only met at Milbourne Junction, you know, and he has talked chiefly of business. I gathered, however, that there has been a good deal of medical consultation, and that doctors think gravely of Dick’s state of health ; but I conclude from his tone and manner that this is not to pass on to your mother.’

Cuthbert was evidently right as to this,

for throughout the evening in his wife's presence Mr. Brandon kept up the same hopeful tone in speaking of Dick, and made no attempt to avoid the subject or to prevent her from asking questions. If, as Alice fancied, he would have preferred to say as little about it all as possible, he did not choose that Mrs. Brandon should think so. When she, however, went to bed at her usual early hour, Mr. Brandon, contrary to his habit when they were a mere family party, remained in the drawing-room. For quite half an hour he sat silent and moody in his arm-chair without even a pretence at employment, Alice and Cuthbert meanwhile being apparently absorbed in their respective books. At length he rose and went to stand with his back to the fire, saying abruptly almost immediately afterwards:

‘So Laurence’s new wife let all this out to your mother?’

Alice closed her book and looked up, prepared to face the storm which she had been expecting.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It was impossible to get her stopped in time, and afterwards I had no choice but to tell mother the whole truth. It would have done her more harm to fancy that anything was being kept back from her.’

‘Of course it would when once the woman had been such a fool as to let her guess at the truth. *You* couldn’t help it, I know,’ growled Mr. Brandon, and then, to Alice’s extreme surprise, he stopped. She waited, but no such rough violent outburst of anger as she had expected followed; and after a few moments’ silence he added, rather as if speaking to himself, ‘After all, perhaps it is better that she should know as much as that.’

‘What more is there to know, papa?’

asked Alice, a good deal startled by his unusual manner.

‘Nothing very definite,’ replied her father shortly.

The answer was repelling, but it was given as if Mr. Brandon were unable to resist the temptation of evading the question for the moment; and Alice persisted, for she felt not only that she must know more, but that her father really wished to be forced to speak out, however much it might cost him to do so.

‘Is Dr. Franklyn not hopeful of gaining sufficient influence over Dick to make a lasting impression?’ she asked.

There was a pause before Mr. Brandon answered. He seemed to find it hard to say what yet must be said. At last he spoke :

‘He does not expect to have any trouble in getting on with Dick or in managing

him while they are together ; and I think he is right there, for he seems to have got over the first difficulties of their position wonderfully quickly. Dick likes him in spite of himself, and is evidently already quite under his influence.'

'Surely nothing could be more promising ?' said Alice.

'Nothing—for the moment ; but he says that he has seldom had so little hope for the future.'

In answer to further questions from both Alice and Cuthbert, Mr. Brandon gradually told them all that he knew. Dr. Franklyn had seen reason to fear (from certain symptoms too slight to strike any but a professional and unusually keen observer) that Dick's mode of life had already told seriously on a naturally weak constitution, and, before finally undertaking the responsibility of the case, he had insisted on satisfy-

ing himself as to the truth of this suspicion, as far as it was possible to do so, by means of the best medical opinions. The result of much consultation had been to confirm his view. There appeared to be unmistakable signs of the beginning of organic mischief in the brain, which, however, under the most favourable conditions of life and treatment might possibly remain dormant for years, though the least relaxation of care might at any time lead to its rapid development, and to death—possibly sudden, but more probably by the lingering torture of creeping paralysis.

Every authority had agreed that the plans already, for other reasons, devised for Dick would give him the best *chance* of life and health; and therefore Mr. Brandon, with a full knowledge of the possibilities to be dreaded, had decided to adhere to them, trusting his son absolutely to Dr. Franklyn,

in whose judgment, skill, and kindness he seemed to feel perfect confidence.

Alice felt that her father had decided rightly, though she wondered at his having had the resolution to do so, since he evidently quite realised both how much there was to fear, and how very little to hope even under the most favourable circumstances. She had never in her life felt such pity for anyone as she felt for him while he was telling them all this, though it was told without any expression of feeling except what was betrayed by the very hardness of his tone and manner. He kept back nothing, he apparently softened nothing; but he spoke as briefly as was possible, and until the end made no comment whatever on the facts and opinions he repeated.

‘Remember,’ he said then, ‘I will not have his mother harassed by fresh anxiety.

She knows enough already to break any shock that may come, and she shall not be tortured by living in constant dread. No hint of what I have told you to-night is to pass beyond ourselves until concealment becomes impossible ; but I wished you to know all that I do, for it is to you two that I must look for help in dealing with the difficulties which lie before us, and from which no success of Dr. Franklyn's, even if it should exceed his most sanguine expectations, can relieve us. The better his work is done, indeed, the harder it will be for us to do ours.'

Mr. Brandon left the room after this without allowing time for any answer, and for a few moments there was silence. Alice was at first incapable of speaking, and Cuthbert understood her well enough to know that he had better not take the initiative, but leave her to reveal as much or as

little of her thoughts and feelings as she chose.

He himself was both shocked and grieved by this confirmation of all the fears which he and Alice had for so long shared about Dick, and was most truly sorry for Mr. Brandon, on whom no blow more severe or more unexpected could probably have fallen ; but he could not shake off the consoling thought that nothing could be so good for Alice at the present moment as to be forcibly taken out of herself, and that nothing could so effectually do this as a deep and real family anxiety. No artificially got up distraction, however ostensibly useful and benevolent it might have been, could have had half the healing and strengthening power which would spring from the consciousness that her father needed her and depended on her for help and comfort in his sorrow and disappointment.

Cuthbert was right. Alice was of a nature to forget herself in her keen sympathy with her father, her compassion for her brother, and her anxiety for her mother, and to feel her own troubles dwarfed by her full comprehension of all that had just been told to her.

After a few moments' silence she left her seat and joined Cuthbert, who had been for some time standing by the fire with Mr. Brandon, and had remained there when he left the room.

'It is horrible!' she exclaimed, and her voice was low and unsteady. 'Too dreadful to think of!'

'It is very sad,' said Cuthbert. 'He is so young, poor boy, and somehow seems scarcely to have had a fair chance; though it would not have been easy, under the circumstances, to manage him better, I dare say.'

‘The most horrible part of it,’ continued Alice, ‘is to see that papa does not in his heart even *wish* to hope—that, even while doing all that can be done to save him, he feels that it will be easier to reconcile himself to what people would call the worst than to the best—that death would be preferable to life.’

Cuthbert could not contradict her.

‘Even to us,’ he said, ‘though we have long foreseen something of the sort, this comes now as a painful shock, and we cannot wonder that your father, who has blinded himself for so long, should be hardly able to bear the sudden disappointment of every hope.’

‘Yes, it is *that* which to me is so sad,’ answered Alice slowly. ‘It seems unfeeling to think more of that than of Dick, poor boy, but I cannot help it. To have every hope extinguished at the end of a

long laborious life—to have toiled and schemed all these years, deluded by the apparent promise of success, and then to find that he has totally failed—must be a terrible blow to a man like papa. His whole heart was in the future he was building for Dick, and now he knows that all he can do will be to guard as well as may be against whatever form Dick's weakness may happen to take. He will need you more than ever now, Cuthbert. Nobody can be to him anything like the help and comfort that you will be; and you will let us count on your doing all you can for him, will you not? You won't think of leaving him *now*?

‘Leaving him, Alice! What can you mean?’

‘I have thought once or twice this summer that you had some wish for change,’ she replied. ‘That offer from

those German people, just before you went for your holiday, tempted you a little, I think, though you refused it; and I am sure I do not wonder, for the charms of Scotsborough are certainly limited. But I know you are too good to desert papa now, even were *I* not selfish enough to beg you to stay to help us through all the trouble that lies before us. What should I do without you ?'

Cuthbert had no idea that he had ever betrayed, even to Alice's sharp eyes, any wish to leave his present position ; but the offer to which she alluded had certainly been tempting to him.

He had felt that it would be a relief to escape from the sight of Alice's happiness in a life quite independent of his own. She had seen the wish to go, and must be left in the belief that it came from a mere desire for change ; but he could answer her present



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CHAPTER III.

‘**S**O Mrs. Chaloner has had her brother staying there since she came home?’ said Mr. Brandon to his daughter across the breakfast-table the next morning.

The assertion was so distinctly interrogative that Alice felt it must be answered.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He came for a day or two to meet Madame d’Yffiniac.’

‘Only for that?’ asked her father sharply. ‘I think, then, it is time for me to inquire how long you mean to

keep him hanging on in this indefinite way ?'

Delicate tact was not Mr. Brandon's strong point, but even he would scarcely have plunged abruptly into such a subject at a time when it was impossible for Cuthbert to escape from the unpleasant position of a third, except from a deliberate intention that he should, however reluctantly, be present.

Alice had fully expected to have to face her father's openly and strongly expressed displeasure as soon as he should learn from Mrs. Chaloner what had happened ; but she was startled by this sudden attack while he still evidently knew nothing.

The resentment which she would naturally have shown at such interference with her freedom of action was now, however, checked by regret that he should have to bear this fresh disappointment ; and

therefore to Cuthbert's relief, though considerably to his surprise, she answered gently and frankly :

‘ I won't pretend not to understand you, papa, and if you are vexed or disappointed I shall be sorry ; but there is nothing indefinite about the matter any longer.’

‘ In plain English, you mean that you have refused him ?’

She gave the assent of silence, but it was followed by no such outburst of anger as she had expected.

‘ I am surprised,’ said Mr. Brandon, after a moment's pause, ‘ but I am not disappointed. After things had gone so far I could not have retracted the consent I had promised, and I should have done for you all that Lord St. Aubyn could have expected from me ; but I no longer wish for this or for any similar marriage for you. *That*, perhaps, is going too far for *you*?’ he

added abruptly, looking at her with sharp suspicion.

‘Not at all,’ was the instant reply. ‘As far as I can foresee, I shall prefer not to marry.’

It was said without blush or hesitation, and Mr. Brandon was content to accept it as an assurance that Eliot St. Aubyn had not been refused for the sake of a rival. The tones of his daughter's voice did not betray to him, as they did to Cuthbert, feelings too deep to find expression in superficial agitation.

‘You can't answer for the future,’ he said, ‘but I am glad that you fancy you can, because I want you for the present to give your whole attention to being trained into a thorough woman of business. You must see that, after this, no real power over anything can safely be left in Dick's hands, and I wish it to be as much as possible in

yours, with Cuthbert as a joint trustee to help you in taking up my work, so that the carrying out of my plans may only be postponed, not given up.'

'If you think I can be of any use——' began Alice.

Her father interrupted her.

'Why should you not? You have clear head and a strong will, with plenty of sense and spirit; and though you will have a good deal to learn, there is nothing beyond your powers if you choose to use them, which you certainly ought to do, for in all probability Dick's inheritance as well as your own will fall to you.'

Alice would have spoken, but he stopped her authoritatively.

'Hear me out. The doctors say that he *may* live for some years, that it is even *possible* that care may so far restore him to health, for a time, that he may marry and

leave children to succeed him—but it is neither likely nor desirable. If it should be so, however, your difficulties and responsibilities would not be lessened, for I must trust you with the fullest powers I can give, to the end that you may so manage things that my intentions shall be fulfilled, though only in the next generation.'

His voice broke, and for a moment he was silent ; but quickly recovering his self-control, he went on firmly :

'It will be essential that for some time you should devote yourself almost entirely to learning your work, and when eventually you do marry, my consent will necessarily depend on very different considerations from those which made me think young St. Aubyn a suitable match for you when it was suggested to me last year.'

At any other time Alice would have been

divided between indignation at her father's cool assumption of a right to dispose of her in such arbitrary fashion, and amusement at the absurdity of his supposing that she would under any circumstances have allowed the imaginary duty of furthering his schemes of family aggrandisement to weigh with her for a moment in a matter so personal to herself as her marriage. She was now, however, too compassionate for him to be angry, and too heart-sick to be amused. It jarred upon her to find her father thus instantly seeking to stifle in fresh plans of the same sort the sorrow which she could not doubt that he acutely felt, while at the same time it struck her painfully that in all probability he would now have welcomed rather than opposed (as she had before been prepared for his doing) her marriage to Colonel Myddleton, had such an idea been suggested to him.

He would have recognised that Colonel Myddleton, more than anyone else, would have given her the help and support so needful to enable her to fill the difficult part he was assigning to her, and that if fate should decree that she must hold the property in trust for her brother and his children, he too would have done his utmost for their advantage without a thought of self-interest.

The feelings roused by such thoughts were almost too overpowering for Alice's self-control, and she hastily rose from the table. She forced herself to say as steadily as she could:

‘If you and Cuthbert will do your best to teach me, I will do mine to learn.’

And then she instantly left the room.

Cuthbert breathed more freely when she was gone, though he rather dreaded what might next be said. Even while repelled

by the apparent want of feeling with which the father had so soon begun to reconstruct without his son the worldly schemes of which that son had so long been the centre, Cuthbert could not help being impressed by the strength of will and firmness of purpose which absolutely refused to accept defeat. To him, as to Alice, Mr. Brandon's plain-speaking was saved from being revolting by being understood. They saw that it was the expression of the determined struggle of a strong nature against the suffering and humiliation of a disappointment to which it would not yield.

As regarded himself, Cuthbert felt as if caught in a trap. He had promised Alice fully to share in every family trouble, but he had not counted on having to give such help as now seemed certain to be expected from him if Mr. Brandon's projects were to be carried out. There could be no doubt

that for Alice it would be in every way a gain to give her father the entire devotion he was now claiming from her, for she would have constant, full occupation in which she could not fail to be interested. The remedy so difficult to invent, because so useless if perceptibly artificial, had presented itself naturally, and for her sake he rejoiced ; but he felt that his own position would be so trying as to be almost unbearable. Mr. Brandon would, he was pretty sure, leave chiefly to him the task of helping Alice to master all the new subjects on which she must learn to think and decide, while she herself would equally of course expect to find his attention and assistance always at her command.

This was a state of things which would, he felt, be almost intolerable to him, though, had he been free to think only of her and of himself, the prospect would have

been welcome enough. Such constant and intimate association in her present mood might then not improbably have led to her ultimately becoming his wife, with every promise of happiness for them both ; but he could now less than ever take advantage of the chance thus afforded to him, for she would in all likelihood be Mr. Brandon's sole heiress, and as such he was bound in honour not to seek to win her for himself.

A rather long silence was broken by Mr. Brandon.

‘ You say nothing, Cuthbert, but I should like to have your opinion of all this.’

‘ You could not do better, sir, I should say,’ replied Cuthbert. ‘ It will throw a great responsibility on Alice, especially if poor Dick should live, but I have no doubt she will prove herself equal to it.’

‘ I think she will,’ said Mr. Brandon, ‘ and

she will have you to help her. I shall give you equal powers. But we need scarcely take the chance of Dick's surviving me into consideration, though of course I shall arrange for it as a possible contingency, for one never knows what may happen. He cannot live long. The great doctors would only say that, though there was certainly cause for the gravest anxiety, partial recovery was to a certain extent *possible*; but I saw that they did not expect it, and I made Franklyn speak out. He does not think there is a chance of improvement—to retard and mitigate is all that can be done. I did not choose to speak so plainly to Alice ; one has to soften these things to women, for however clearly they understand, they never can bear to have this sort of truth put in plain words.'

Cuthbert could scarcely help smiling at Mr. Brandon's impression of having success-

fully 'softened' the facts, which could hardly have been more bluntly told, but he only said :

'I was afraid that it must be so, though your allowing him to start on this voyage seemed more hopeful.'

'Say it out,' replied Mr. Brandon. 'You could not believe that even I would deliberately send the boy away to die a lingering death among strangers? But if you look at it all round I think you will admit that I was right. Take it as one will, Cuthbert, it is a wretched business. I should not care to have to live again through such a week as this has been to me; but I had to face the facts and make the best I could of them—and to have brought Dick home again, or to have allowed him to be in any way his own master, would certainly not have been to do that.'

‘No. If the case is as they tell you it is, I suppose that would have been equivalent to signing his death-warrant,’ said Cuthbert.

‘He has done that for himself by his own vicious folly,’ answered Mr. Brandon bluntly. ‘But it would undoubtedly have hastened his death. As it is, Dr. Franklyn will make the most of such chance of temporary recovery as he has left himself, and whenever it becomes necessary will either bring him home to us, or more probably take him to some place where we can go to him. Managed in this way what remains of his life will at any rate be saved from being disgraceful, and his mother will be spared the prolonged torture of such watching. She need know nothing of the real truth until pity for the extremity of physical illness blots out everything else. I believe it would kill her to know *now* what we do.’

Cuthbert was privately inclined to doubt the wisdom of thus persistently trying to shield anyone artificially from the sorrows which fell naturally to their lot, but it would have been useless to say so, and he held his peace.

‘And now as to the part I am asking *you* to take in all this?’ said Mr. Brandon; breaking the rather long silence which followed his last words.

Cuthbert hesitated for a moment, struggling with the temptation to seize the opportunity to speak out so frankly as to ensure his release from the difficult task which was being imposed upon him, and from which, if he now acquiesced in undertaking it, he felt that he could not afterwards withdraw. The passing impulse was, however, conquered, and the duty of absolute self-suppression deliberately accepted.

‘For some reasons,’ he said, ‘I should, I

confess, have been glad if you could have dispensed with my help; but I see all the objections and difficulties in the way of your putting anyone else in the place you wish me to take, and therefore there is nothing more to be said except that I will do my best.'

'On the contrary,' said Mr. Brandon, 'there are one or two things which I think had better be said plainly and at once. We must understand each other too thoroughly for any chance of mistakes.'

'You need not be afraid,' interrupted Cuthbert quickly and with a heightened colour. 'I shall not seek to break the tacit agreement which has always existed between us as to my position among you.'

'That position would be totally changed now,' replied Mr. Brandon, 'and you must hear all I have to say before you answer me.'

I do not consider that I have any right to ask you to devote your life to carrying out plans of mine, without offering you a full equivalent for the sacrifice of whatever your own may have been. I intend from this moment to give you all the rights which would have been yours if you had been a younger son of my own, and this absolutely without reference to any further arrangements between us. You undertake the duties of one, and it is for me to give you the privileges, knowing well on which side of the account between us the balance will even then be heavy.'

Cuthbert was too much touched to find it very easy to answer readily.

'You must not think that I do not fully appreciate so kind and liberal a proposal,' he said; 'but indeed it is unnecessary. It is far more than I have any right to expect, and I am sure that while everything is so

uncertain it will be wiser to decide nothing of that kind. Trust to my doing all I can to be of use to you, and I will confidently leave my interests in your hands, sure of justice and generosity ; but do not hamper yourself or any of us by definite pledges—so much must depend on Dick's health——'

'That is a mere nominal uncertainty which is easily allowed and arranged for, but which cannot practically affect our plans,' said Mr. Brandon.

'You may not need me long for other reasons—Alice will probably soon marry, and then her husband will of course be the proper person——'

'Exactly,' interposed Mr. Brandon, 'and if you would only let me speak, you would know that *that* is just what I wish. Alice is more capable of filling the position before her than most girls would be, but

there will be much which, as a woman, it is impossible for her to do, and which you, as her husband and my son-in-law, must do for her and for me. You will do it far better than poor Dick could ever have done it. I told you we must speak plainly. While Dick was likely to be my heir, I could never have consented to your marrying Alice, though you were personally all I could wish, and though I saw well enough that you loved her. But it is of far more importance, *now*, that her husband should be a man of sense and judgment and tact, capable of making the most of a splendid opening, than that he should have high connections or a title. I shall be surprised if you and Alice and I cannot win the second for ourselves without the help of the first—and I don't care to reduce my own name to insignificance by tacking it on to that of an aristocratic son-in-law.

You are the man I want, Cuthbert, to bring the Brandons of Earnscliffe to the front, which is what I think of most ; but I can truly say that to secure your being one of us is the greatest comfort I could have. There is no one with whom I could work so well, or whom I could so thoroughly trust. My plans for Dick you have long known. They pass now to you, and I know that you will develop them more fully and more quickly than I could have done through him by any amount of pushing and prompting.'

Cuthbert had listened in almost bewildered silence to this certainly rather startling programme, and when Mr. Brandon ceased speaking it was only by a great effort that he could make anything approaching to a suitable answer. Fortunately, under the circumstances, he could do nothing better than express what he really felt as

far as he was able to do so. He could say truly and gratefully that the position thus offered to him would, if it could be won, realise his wildest dreams both of ambition and happiness, and could promise that he himself would spare no possible effort to win it; but when all this had been said he felt that a qualifying clause must be added.

‘And if, after all, I fail——’ he began.

‘A man who makes up his mind to succeed does not fail,’ interrupted Mr. Brandon.

‘But in this case everything must finally depend on Alice,’ replied Cuthbert, ‘and I am quite sure that it has never occurred to her to think of me in any other light than in that of a useful sort of brotherly friend always ready to help her, and she may not easily change.’

‘Nothing of the kind was likely to occur

to her while you never tried to put it into her head, and I admit that you have behaved thoroughly well in that way. But you know now that there is no rival in the field—she said as much just now—and you will have opportunities such as no one else can have of being constantly with her, of associating yourself with everything that will interest her most, and of making yourself indispensable to her; and if with all those advantages and free leave to use them, you can't bring her round to see things as you wish, you must be a greater fool than I take you for.'

Cuthbert gave no hint that he suspected the existence of any rival. He merely said:

'I do honestly think that I ought to have a very fair chance of succeeding *in time*, but I am sure that it would be destroyed if Alice were to——'

‘Suspect us of having conspired together against her freedom of action?’ exclaimed Mr. Brandon, with a laugh. ‘True. She would not be her father’s daughter if she didn’t kick at any attempt to drive her, even in the way it would really suit her best to go. We both know her well enough to keep our present treaty secret, I think, and I shall not interfere. Manage your love affairs your own way—and there is no hurry—in fact, a considerable delay will be all the better for many reasons; only take care that no one else has a chance of cutting you out meanwhile. From this time forward we must begin gradually to arrange that as much as possible of your mere routine work at Scotsborough shall be done for you, so that you may be free to attend to more important things.’

Cuthbert, in declaring his readiness to acquiesce in any new arrangement that

Mr. Brandon might think desirable, ventured to suggest that the less conspicuous such changes could be made, the better it would be from every point of view.

To this Mr. Brandon agreed.

‘We will be as cautious as you could wish,’ he said; ‘but you must begin to be more here, and to learn to take your part in our country life, both as to the management of the property and as to making acquaintances. You must by degrees show signs of intending to come vigorously to the front, both socially and politically, as soon as an opportunity offers itself, so that when the place for you is vacant you may seem undoubtedly the right person to take it. And now we need say no more about it. We understand each other, and shall work well together, I have no doubt; only don’t forget, Cuthbert, that every hope and interest remaining to me must now depend

for fulfilment on you and Alice, and that if you fail me I shall have nothing left to live for.'

The last words were spoken hurriedly, and with more emotion than he often allowed himself to show; and as he ceased speaking he left the room, without waiting for any reply.

Cuthbert, when he thus found himself alone, tried to think as dispassionately as he could over what had passed, and even with his knowledge of all the chances against him, he could not but feel that he might reasonably indulge in a greater degree of hopefulness than he had ever done before. He did not blind himself to the possibility that there might prove to have been some great mistake as to Dick's condition, since the verdicts of even the highest medical authorities were often premature; but he believed himself to be

capable of keeping this truth steadily in his mind while patiently waiting the issue. In fact, for the moment, he really cared very little what that issue might be, for Mr. Brandon had given him full permission in either case to marry Alice if he could; while from a mere worldly point the advantages offered to himself would be, whether Dick lived or died, infinitely greater than he had naturally any right to expect.

On the other hand, he would have given much to be able to lift the veil which concealed from him all accurate knowledge of the position in which Alice and Colonel Myddleton now stood towards each other.

If the separation between them, whatever its cause, were absolute and final, then he had little doubt of his own success in time; patience and devotion would then surely win her sooner or later. But he could not yet feel at all certain that their present

estrangement might not pass away, and in that case he knew perfectly well that he should himself have no choice left but to withdraw from them all entirely; for he was too clear-sighted to doubt that Colonel Myddleton would then completely take his place, and too just not to recognise both that it would be right that he should do so, and that he would be fully competent to fill it well.

Cuthbert saw both sides of the question, and with his eyes fully open decided to run the risk. Failure in the future might have a sharper sting than voluntary renunciation now, but he should have the twofold consolation of knowing that he had given himself every possible chance open to him, and that he had left nothing undone which it was in his power to do to promote Alice's happiness and welfare.



CHAPTER IV.

MADAME D'YFFINIAC'S home had for many years been a cottage on the outskirts of the little town of Quimperlé in Brittany. Very soon after the death of the old Russian princess whose companion she had been, she had spent the small legacy left to her in the purchase of this tiny property, and had subsequently improved the house and garden until she had made her 'little Breton nest,' as she called it, a miniature model of picturesque comfort. Her motives for settling there, if, as some people chose to

assume, she had other reasons than those she openly gave, were known only to herself.

She professed that she had fixed upon the place because, although both pretty and pleasant, it was without any striking features likely to attract people in general, and was therefore cheap as well as convenient from having every modern advantage of railway and telegraph to facilitate the regular communication with the rest of the world which her habits and occupations made essential to her.

Quimperlé could certainly not boast of much 'society' in the conventional sense of the word, but Madame d'Yffiniac saw quite enough of that elsewhere, and had gradually formed ties of acquaintance and friendship with her neighbours of all classes, among whom she found opportunities of studying human nature under conditions less arti-

ficial and more interesting than the fashionable world afforded her. She was within easy reach, too, of beautiful scenery of many varied types, and was, apparently, quite satisfied with her choice of a home, although Quimperlé, notwithstanding the charms of its position, was undeniably a sleepy little place, where few people cared to come, and where fewer still cared to remain many hours. Sometimes a friend unexpectedly appeared, or a stranger by chance brought a note of introduction to her ; but she was, on the whole, as unmolested as she could desire. Occasionally she had a friend to stay with her for a few days ; but when she was at home she usually lived alone, and spent her time in honest hard work, incompatible with the presence of even the least exacting of guests.

The summer of the year following

Madame d'Yffiniac's short stay at Clifton Grange, after Bertie Chaloner's accident, was, however, an exception to this rule, for Alice Brandon spent several weeks at Quimperlé ; and while she was there her hostess devoted herself entirely to her amusement, trying in every possible way to make her visit the time of real rest and refreshment of which, when she came, Alice obviously and even avowedly stood in need.

Madame d'Yffiniac had the pleasure of seeing her care rewarded by thorough success. When Alice's leave of absence from home came to an end, she had regained her usual health and strength of both body and mind, and was as full of life and of eager interest as ever, though perhaps she was somewhat less bright and joyous than she had formerly been, and was certainly less impetuous and wilful.

'Letters, Alice !' said Madame d'Yffiniac, as, with several in her hand, she came out late one afternoon into the veranda where Alice was standing at an easel and working diligently at a study of flowers from nature.

Alice took her share of the budget, and for the next hour was too completely absorbed—not so much in the actual contents of the letters as in the thoughts of the past and future which they suggested to her—to pay much attention to Madame d'Yffiniac's rather abrupt announcement a few minutes later, that she herself was going down into the town on an errand, but would leave Alice to enjoy her letters in peace during her absence.

Alice's letters were not numerous. There was a note from some friends at Dinard with whom she was to stay on her way home, but this treated only of travelling

arrangements. There were a few lines from her father desiring her not to accept any further invitations or to linger on her way home, as there were many things which he wished to have settled without delay, and for which her presence and co-operation were necessary. There was, finally, a letter from Cuthbert Vaughan, somewhat longer; and though he wrote chiefly of business matters he gave also some home news, and then concluded thus:

‘I am glad to be able to say that your father continues quite well in health, and has resumed work with all his old spirit and energy; he is, however, still restless and irritable, full of schemes, and impatient of any contradiction or opposition with regard to them; and I am afraid you may find a good deal to try you when first you take your place at home again, for I can scarcely dare to hope that you will find it

possible to agree to the plans which he has made up his mind to urge upon you at once. I would not spoil the last days of your holiday by alluding to this if I could manage things as I should wish, but since I cannot feel any confidence that Mr. Brandon is not even now writing to you on the subject, I have no choice but to say *my* say without further delay. I want to tell you, once for all, and as plainly and emphatically as it can be said, that your peace and happiness will always be my first object ; and that whatever difficulties and differences of opinion may arise among us, you may rely on my doing my best to protect you from annoyance, as far as it is in my power to do so, and to secure you perfect freedom of action in all things.'

Alice understood, as Cuthbert well knew that she would understand, and it was a severe shock to find herself thus suddenly

brought face to face with that worst climax of all her troubles, which she had hitherto tried to persuade herself was only a possible shadow over the distant future, so likely to melt away before it became a reality that it might safely be ignored.

It was now again September—just a year since that parting in the Brianskirk woods ; but those twelve months had been so filled with ‘labour and sorrow’ that it seemed to Alice as if the longest part of her life had passed since that time.

Mr. Brandon never did things by halves. He had resolved that his daughter should be made thoroughly to understand all his affairs, that Cuthbert should be brought forward into social prominence, and that at the same time they should both learn to depend so much on each other’s helpful sympathy as to be unable ever again to dispense with it. As usual, he had in a

great measure succeeded in carrying out his wishes. Alice had given her heart to the task assigned to her, and finding Cuthbert's assistance invaluable had frankly claimed it on all occasions, while she readily acted on every hint of her father's to do all in her power to secure to Cuthbert the social recognition which she herself had always felt to be his due. She did it, however, in perfect unconsciousness that these new plans of her father's had any connection with schemes concerning her own future, and Cuthbert himself was quite aware of this. He was not deceived by her sisterly confidence ; but neither was he without some hope that time and patient devotion might in the end bring about a change in his favour.

The first three months after Mr. Brandon's return home from the melancholy errand of sending Dick off under Dr. Franklyn's care was thus a time of real

hard work for Alice, while the social duties now imposed on her were really only business in another form. She had, too, a great and increasing anxiety to bear, for she saw, what her father would not see, that her mother's health was steadily failing, and that the present state of suspense about Dick was a nervous strain beyond her strength. There were also constant difficulties and worries connected with the rectory which added greatly to the burden of both mother and daughter.

Mrs. Carr continued to profess the greatest admiration and affection for her sister-in-law, and (whenever Alice was away from home) spent a great deal of time with her; but she seldom went to the hall without fatiguing and torturing Mrs. Brandon almost beyond even *her* powers of gentle endurance, for not only did she continue to honour Alice with an irrational

dislike which she would not refrain from putting into words, but there was no limit to her tedious egotistical confidences.

The new state of things at the rectory was certainly not a success so far. Mrs. Carr, after her usual self-conscious theatrical fashion, posed as a *grande dame* proving herself a model poor man's wife. She devoted herself to housekeeping and to the children's education with more zeal than discretion, and though all her schemes and theories had considerable merits, for she was undoubtedly clever and original, yet as she had neither practical experience, nor method, nor perseverance, everything soon went wrong. The old servants, 'worried out of their lives with her fads and fancies,' left. They were replaced by young ones, whom she proposed to train herself to new and improved modes of service, the result being, as might have

been expected, a household at once thoroughly incompetent and very costly. The children were alternately overworked and neglected, while they were puzzled and fretted by uncertain and capricious management. They did not in the least understand the artificial simplicity which was expected of them, and which would have been as unlike real child nature as anything could well be ; but they were quite able to perceive the discrepancy between their stepmother's high-flown sentiments and her practical selfishness and want of truth, and they very soon had even less respect for her than [she deserved, for the strange complexities of her mind and character were quite beyond their comprehension. They despised and disliked her ; they marvelled at seeing their father so completely 'taken in by her talk ;' they were enraged at his being such a slave to

all her fancies; and though neither Mrs. Brandon nor Alice ever allowed them to criticise her, it was very soon only too evident that no training could be worse for them than to grow up under her care.

That Mrs. Carr believed herself to love her husband with a love more perfect than any other woman could bestow, and did really love him as much as she was capable of loving anything but herself, Mrs. Brandon was convinced. It was evident also that she had for him something of the same fascination which had made Harold Leigh so blind to her worst faults; but it was impossible to believe that, even if he continued under the spell, she could ever make his home really happy, and Mrs. Brandon shrank from the idea of the troubles which were probably in store for the brother whom next to her husband and children she loved better than anything in the world.

Physical weakness and depression of spirits reacted on each other, notwithstanding the most conscientious and unselfish efforts to resist their power, and when, in the winter, an unusually long and severe frost brought on an acute attack of illness, there was no strength left to struggle against it. Mrs. Brandon died early in January, and Alice, who had always warmly loved and appreciated her mother, felt that the loss to herself was irreparable. It was, moreover, the first sorrow of the kind that had fallen on her home, the first break in the circle, her own first contact with the solemn mystery of death, and she was deeply impressed and moved by it; but fortunately she was obliged to forget herself in care for her father, who seemed utterly crushed by the blow, although he had known for years that it might fall at any moment.

The first thing that roused him into anything like his natural vigour of mind and body was an alarming account of his son. Dr. Franklyn telegraphed from Rio that there were such decided signs of increasing illness that he thought it right to turn homewards at once, and he suggested that some of the family should, if possible, meet them at Madeira, where he would at any rate await an answer and further instructions. Mr. Brandon realised so vividly what would have been his wife's feelings had she been living that his first words to Alice were, 'Thank God that your mother is spared this! She could not have gone to him, and the waiting at home would have been agony to her.'

From that moment Mr. Brandon was himself again. He was possessed with the one idea of instantly doing everything that his wife could possibly have wished should

be done for the son she had so dearly loved, and the necessity for immediate exertion, for both thinking and acting, restored his former energy and activity. He and Alice started for Madeira by the first steamer that was available, and reached the island only a day or two after Dick's yacht arrived there. He, poor boy, was destined never again to leave it. There was at first some question as to whether to remain there or to return home, but it was soon settled by his own wish to stay where he was—'until he was well again.' There was nothing to be gained by thwarting him, no chance of life would be thrown away by letting him have his will ; and therefore, as he was tired of the yacht, a villa was taken, where they settled themselves. Dr. Franklyn remained with them, and he and Alice did all that could be done to soothe and cheer the last months of the

life which they had to watch ebbing away. It was an arduous and painful task, for in the earlier stages there was great irritability, and a good deal of suffering, while towards the end the increasing imbecility and helplessness made the case a more than commonly trying one to nurse. The end came in June, and then the yacht took the rest of the party back to England.

Alice's cares were not, however, yet ended, for when they arrived in London Mr. Brandon was sufficiently out of health to be ordered imperatively to German baths before going home. The climate of Madeira had not suited him, and this, combined with all the trouble of the past six months, had greatly changed him for the time. He was not an easy patient to manage, and in some ways these last few weeks were the most trying of all to Alice. She did her part bravely and resolutely, but

when at last her father, fully restored to his usual health, was on his way home, she felt that the time had come when she might, nay when she *must*, have rest and change herself; change not of scene or air, for that she had had abundantly, but of companionship and of interests. Mr. Brandon did not like having to go home alone, but he was wise enough to see that Alice really required a holiday, and he consented to her going to spend a few weeks with Madame d'Yffiniac before she joined him at Earnscliffe.

When first Alice arrived at Quimperlé, Madame d'Yffiniac was shocked to see her; indeed, Alice herself had scarcely known, until the pressure was removed, how much it had told on her. Nothing could probably have been better calculated to restore her health and spirits than a life so different in all ways from anything

she had ever known. She was delighted and amused with the primitive simplicity of the little household, which was arranged quite after local fashions. A quaint old Breton couple did all that had to be done, both indoors and out, and did it well, though with an entire absence of the conventional forms of English domestic service; while their pretty daughter, Rosalie, who, when travelling or visiting with her mistress, was the smartest and most knowing of French lady's-maids, at home turned her hand to all sorts of work, and ably seconded Madame d'Yffiniac in giving to everything the dainty grace and finish which had so charming an effect.

It was on the whole a fine summer, and the greater part of most days was spent out of doors.

They made excursions both near and distant; sometimes for the purpose of

sketching, sometimes merely for sight-seeing ; and each place they saw seemed to suggest to Madame d'Yffiniac something interesting to tell, an old legend or a curious bit of ecclesiastical history, a romance of the old *noblesse*, or a striking story of peasant-life. She knew the country and its traditions and customs thoroughly, and was herself well and widely known. With her Alice had glimpses of a kind of life hitherto known to her only through books, and she found the reality much more interesting than the bookmakers' sketches of it, if not always quite so conventionally picturesque.

On the days when they stayed at home, either from bad weather or from choice, they read and painted and talked untiringly ; but by tacit mutual consent they never alluded to the last day they had spent together the previous summer.

Alice was glad of this, for though she loved and admired Madame d'Yffiniac as much as ever, and delighted in her society, she felt that on some points they differed widely and could now never meet, whatever might once have been the chance of their doing so.

For six weeks Alice had resolutely given herself up to the peaceful enjoyment of the present. Saddening thoughts of the past had inevitably often recurred, but these she would not have banished even if she could have done so; and she had succeeded for the time in putting aside all anxiety as to future troubles.

It was therefore now rather a shock to be abruptly plunged by these letters into the depths of home cares and worries. She knew at once what both Mr. Brandon and Cuthbert meant, for since Dick's death her father had allowed her to see clearly

enough the line which his wishes and plans were taking. She had felt a vague fear, too, of the truth as regarded Cuthbert, but she had hitherto managed to persuade herself that the day when any decision on her part would be required was distant, and might be almost indefinitely postponed.

She saw now that this was a vain hope, but she had not a moment's doubt as to what her own course must be. Much as it grieved her to have to disappoint and vex her father, and even more to give pain to Cuthbert, who had done so much for her, and for whom she had so strong an affection, there was only one thing for her to do now. Without giving any reasons she must make her father understand at once that he must never expect her to marry; and she must take care that he made this known to Cuthbert.

If it were possible by prompt frankness now to avoid all chance of permanent bitterness or estrangement between herself and Cuthbert, she must not shrink from the annoyance of forcing on a thorough explanation with her father, however painful an ordeal it might be.

She fully realised all that must make this resolution of hers a serious disappointment to her father. She was now his only child, and through her alone could he look forward to attaining the object for which he had laboured all his life. She saw and appreciated all the perfection (from his own point of view) of the scheme which she believed him to have planned, but she could not therefore take the part assigned to her in carrying it out.

Alice had had no direct communication with Colonel Myddleton during the past year; but on hearing of Mrs. Brandon's

death he had written a letter to Lady Elizabeth Randolph, so obviously intended for Alice that it had been at once passed on to her, with permission to 'keep it if she cared to do so.' She did keep it, for though there was nothing in it which any wise and kind friend might not have written under the circumstances, every sentence had a deeper meaning for Alice herself, and the letter was very precious to her. It had, indeed, been a sort of talisman, giving her strength and comfort through all the weary months that followed.

Looking back now, Alice knew herself to be not only a wiser and better, but even a happier woman, notwithstanding all her cares and sorrows, than she had ever been in her apparently brilliant childhood.

She had resolutely set herself to rule her life according to what she knew to be

Colonel Myddleton's principles, and to bear the trial that had fallen to her lot as she believed that he wished her to bear it; and though in the beginning she had done this entirely from the desire to please him and to spare him pain on her account, and from a craving to feel herself always fully in sympathy with him, she had ended by thinking and feeling on many points as she had never done before.

Self-discipline steadily carried out by a nature like hers, though springing in the first instance merely from an earthly affection, did its work. The fretful impatience of restraint in any form, which had been justified by a superficial philosophy, gave way to the clearer and wider views growing out of serious thought; and as she learned by experience the ennobling and purifying power of sorrow and suffering when patiently and bravely borne with the

strengthening aid of humility and submission, she recognised the fallacy of a creed of rebellious resistance. The foundation lines of the faith which had slowly but surely rooted itself in her heart were broad, and not perhaps very clearly defined; but it was none the less true and steady, a living and sustaining force which she felt would never fail her even in her utmost need.

Time had thus so far served only to strengthen and confirm Alice's love for Colonel Myddleton. His influence had been as great in absence as it could possibly have been in the most constant and familiar intercourse, for it had been her daily and hourly guide and support.

No length of separation could affect her feeling for him. While he lived and loved her, any other marriage must be as impossible for her as if she were really his wife—on that point she could not have a moment's

hesitation. Nor could she wish it otherwise, for even disappointment and loneliness, when borne in common with him, were to her a nearer approach to happiness than any lot, however bright, in which he had no share.

Alice's dreams were cut short at last by Madame d'Yffiniac's return. She came quickly through the little *salon* and said abruptly:

'Alice! I have ordered our usual little carriage to be at the door at half-past six to-morrow morning to take us to spend a long day at Le Fäouet.'

'Really? That will be charming!' answered Alice, doing her best to shake off the oppression of her own cares. 'Only, is it not rather a rash tempting of the fates to try again after being stopped three times when all was settled? We shall surely wake to torrents of rain—or old Jeanne will be ill again!'

‘No. The glass has been rising steadily all day—and Jeanne is too perfectly well to get up an illness by so early an hour to-morrow!’

‘Ah, well! something else will contrive to happen then, you may be sure!’

‘Nonsense!’ replied Madame d’Yffiniac. ‘Anyhow we will dare the fates. I hate being baffled, even in trifles, and it was quite a blot on our summer that you should leave Quimperlé without seeing Le Fäouet and the chapel of my saintly namesake—so I have arranged it all impromptu for your last day. You are sufficiently Bretonised by this time not to mind an early start even the day before you begin your journey home.’

‘Oh, not in the least!’ said Alice. ‘And we must hope that St. Barbe will be propitious at last, and secure us immunity from all mischances this time!’



CHAPTER V.

WHEN Alice looked out of her window about half-past five the next morning she saw absolutely nothing but a dense white mist filling the whole valley. It was light enough to drift gently before occasional puffs of wind, but it never for a moment cleared off so as to allow anything that was more than a few yards distant to be even indistinctly visible. No message postponing their proposed excursion was, however, brought to her, so she got up and dressed, and soon after six met Madame d'Yffiniac

in the *salon*, where coffee was ready for them.

‘We are lucky at last!’ was Madame d’Yffiniac’s first greeting. ‘This mist with a rising glass on a September morning means a glorious day. It will probably be broiling before noon.’

Alice laughed.

‘I am in duty bound to believe you, but you must allow that it requires very strong faith indeed to do it.’

‘Perhaps. But you will not be disappointed. It is your last day with me, and I think it will be one that you will never forget.’

Punctually at half-past six they started in the rough little carriage which at Quimperlé was considered all that could be desired for such an excursion. Alice was used to it by this time, and was on terms of the most friendly familiarity both

with the sturdy white horse and its blue-bloused driver.

The first half-hour of their drive was as uninteresting as it was chilly and disagreeable, for they could see literally nothing. This, however, was of little importance, as Madame d'Yffiniac observed, while they were still so near home ; and before they had completed the ascent of the long hill leading out of Quimperlé the mist began to move, to lift here and there for a moment, allowing them mysterious and ghostlike glimpses of the trees and buildings they were passing. Then the sun mustered strength to shine fitfully through the mist and illuminate these strange gigantic phantoms ; and then, as it grew thinner and thinner and drifted about more rapidly, there came peeps of deep blue sky, and for a few seconds a bright ray of sunshine would light up a bit of white road in front of them as they

wound round a ferny grassy glade studded with gnarled old trees ; or a dilapidated mill with its broken wheel and splashing brook ; or a group of peasant children watching their cows ; each picture being framed in the soft white vapour in which it speedily melted away. The hedges and furze bushes were veiled in gossamer sparkling with dewdrops, which in some cases even hung in curtains from tree to tree ; and Alice, who had never before seen so beautiful a series of rapidly changing effects, was enchanted.

As the sun gained power the mist rolled away altogether, the distant country became visible, the world grew like itself on an ordinary fine morning in autumn, and Alice, as she threw aside the warm wraps which the chilly morning had made necessary, drew a deep breath and broke a long silence.

‘It is like a descent from fairyland!’ she exclaimed.

Madame d’Yffiniac laughed.

‘I told you it would be a day to remember,’ she said. ‘But fairyland was rather raw and cold, and I at any rate am glad to welcome the sun.’

As she spoke they stopped in a village, through which they were passing, for the driver to give water to his horse and apparently to refresh himself as well. While they waited a cart drove up and stopped also. Two of the ‘*Petites Sœurs des Pauvres*’ were out on one of their foraging expeditions, and this little village inn was a house which never failed to contribute to their stores. Madame d’Yffiniac knew these Sisters, and had a good deal to say to them as to their work which it interested Alice much to hear; and when the driver, having finished his breakfast, reappeared and pre-

pared to start, her parting present elicited astonished and voluble thanks and blessings.

‘English heiresses are rare in these parts,’ said Madame d’Yffiniac, as they drove on. ‘I doubt if that leather bag of Sister Josephine’s ever before held so large a sum at once; but it is all right—the money will be well spent; and though in theory I hold that *all* begging should be suppressed, one cannot help making a practical reservation in favour of those “Petites Sœurs” when one sees the work they do.’

‘Do you know anything about the younger of those two Sisters?’ asked Alice. ‘I like her face so much.’

‘Yes. She is a handsome woman, and a fine creature altogether. She is the Margot of those two pictures of mine which you have in your tower-room at Earncliffe.

Within a year of that romantic bit of self-devotion her father married again, and the stepmother would not have her at home.'

'And why did she not marry?' said Alice. 'There could no longer be any reason against it.'

'True,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'But it was too late. The young man, after the fashion of so many despairing lovers, had speedily sought consolation and had married a cousin whose liberal *dot* would be useful in his business.'

'Then I am sure he was no great loss to Margot!' cried Alice.

'She would probably have been quite happy with him if they had married,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac, 'for he is a very good fellow, and makes an excellent husband and father. And as she was engaged to him with her parents' consent before her

mother died, I think he had the most right of the two to complain.'

'You blame her for giving him up? I have often wondered what you really meant people to feel as to that.'

Madame d'Yffiniac laughed.

'I made the sketches because the story struck my fancy, and the two scenes contrasted so picturesquely; and I left my public to draw whatever moral pleased it best. As you ask me, however, I should myself say that Margot made a great mistake, though with the best intentions in the world.'

'You think that the lover to whom she had given a voluntary promise had the first claim on her?'

'No doubt he had,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac; 'though, as he got on so well without her, her judgment was perhaps scarcely at fault in not rating his claim on

her as really imperative. The sacrifice of *herself* was the real pity.'

'I suppose she felt it to be a sacred duty to devote herself to her father and the children,' said Alice. 'She obeyed her conscience.'

'Yes. She thought it right, and therefore, for her, it *was* right to decide as she did; and I do not think she is unhappy now, for her heart is in her work among her poor old people. But putting Margot individually out of the question, I should like to get rid of all these narrow ideas as to duty, which so fatally obstruct most women's clearness of judgment in cases of this sort. Margot victimised herself to a conventional superstition as to the universally binding force of the fifth commandment, just as so many women allow their whole lives to be spoiled because it is usually held to be their "duty" to struggle

on at all costs under the paralysing oppression of the most uncongenial marriage, as long as it falls short of the special forms of ill-treatment from which the law protects them.'

'You say that, speaking generally,' protested Alice ; 'but I doubt whether, when it came to the point, you would often advise a woman to leave her home and throw herself alone upon the world.'

'When society has adopted a more liberal code there will be no need for such a woman to face the world alone. But it is certainly not a step to be taken rashly, and where there are children can scarcely ever be advisable. When there are none, I think a woman should be allowed to judge for herself whether or not she will shake off a crushing yoke. Of course if she does so, she must justify herself by the result. It is for her to prove that she had a right to

claim the privilege of acting independently, and that she can live alone more creditably and usefully, as well as more happily—to better purpose altogether—than if she had acquiesced in being for ever weighed down by the distasteful companionship she has chosen to abandon.'

'It sounds plausible as you put it,' said Alice, after a moment's hesitation; 'but I suppose very few of us draw the same conclusions from our experience.'

'You have been persuaded that the old grooves must be blindly followed,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'Well, it is the easier and safer course, no doubt.'

'There is room for improvement everywhere,' said Alice. 'I do not believe that we should always keep to the old grooves, but it does seem to me that one ought to be very certain of being right before leaving them. A false step may be so irretrievably disastrous.'

'True; but "nothing venture, nothing have," you know; and to win much something must be risked.'

'Long ago,' said Alice, 'when I once said something without any very serious meaning, but wilful and impatient, about wishing "to break family fetters," your answer was a warning to me to remember that, though from want of experience I could not then count the cost of doing such a thing, I should none the less have to pay it in full.'

'Exactly,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'Where otherwise would be the risk? And whether such a step is to be blamed as foolhardiness, or praised as moral courage, is merely a question of failure or success. You stake your credit as well as your happiness by such independent action, and therefore if you are wise you will not be too rash, though of course you

throw away your chances if you are too timid. You must balance the scales as best you can.'

'All that is true,' answered Alice; 'but I have learned to see that it is only half the truth, even if you consider things merely from the point of expediency, for in almost every case others who have no voice in the decision have in some way or other to help to pay the cost of a mistake. And besides, Barbe, I have thought a good deal during all our troubles, and——'

'You have come to the conclusion that submissive resignation is better than a struggle for independence, that obedience to conventional laws is nobler than being a law to yourself, and that unquestioning faith, a blind optimism, is to be preferred to a broad philosophy? Be it so. You will probably be happier, and I can rejoice at that, though in some ways I

shall regret to leave you on what seems to me a lower level.'

Alice's colour deepened, for though Madame d'Yffiniac's tone was earnest and affectionate, she felt that it was tinged with slightly contemptuous sarcasm.

'We must agree to differ, I think,' she said gently, but quite firmly. 'Sorrow and trouble seem to have brought a glimmering of some great truths within my reach, and I feel that I must cling to them as *my* best chance of rising some day to a higher level.'

Madame d'Yffiniac smiled.

'Well, dear child, as I said before—be it so. We must all judge for ourselves how we will rule our lives, and I think we have common ground enough on which to meet in sympathy without ever again trenching on this.'

'I should be sorry indeed to doubt it,'

was Alice's instant warm response; and then a long silence followed, which lasted until they had nearly reached their destination.

Alice, notwithstanding her loyal affection and admiration for Madame d'Yffiniac, was certainly less under the spell of her influence than she had formerly been, and could differ from her even on important points without a doubt that she was in the right in doing so. She now wondered a little what painful experiences in her earlier life had formed Madame d'Yffiniac's character, and whether there could be any truth in the notion once suggested by Colonel Myddleton that her theories had grown out of a determination to justify to herself some false step of her own.

But Alice's thoughts soon wandered to her private perplexities, and she was considering the vague possibility of being ulti-

mately rescued from them by a second marriage of her father's, if he were to find that she herself was really determined never to marry, when Madame d'Yffiniac at last broke the silence by a matter-of-fact question as to some of the arrangements for the journey home, which she was to begin the next morning.

Alice, while answering, took out one of the letters which she had received the day before, in order to refer to it as to some detail.

'Oh, Barbe!' she exclaimed, as she glanced through it. 'I am so sorry! Here is an unjustifiable bit of crossing at the top of the first page which I never read till this moment.'

'And does it affect your plans much?'

'It is not about my plans at all. Mrs. Estcourt says in this wretched little corner bit: "Annesley Mainwaring" (he is her

cousin, you know) "has been here for a day or two, and left us on Monday to make his way to Pont Aven, where some artist *protégé* of his is painting a picture for him. That is very near Quimperlé, and I fancy he intends spending next Sunday there." And now, you see, this is Sunday.'

'And what if it is?' replied Madame d'Yffiniac. 'Mr. Mainwaring can see the lions of Quimperlé without our help, I should imagine.'

Alice laughed.

'You know very well that you are yourself the only lion he will care to see at Quimperlé. It is too provoking that through my stupid carelessness you should have missed his visit.'

'You need not reproach yourself,' said Madame d'Yffiniac coolly. 'I knew that Mr. Mainwaring would be at Quimperlé

to-day when I arranged our excursion.'

'You knew it! How?'

'By a note from himself yesterday afternoon; on the receipt of which my slumbering energies woke up sufficiently to decide that *we* would spend the day at Le Fäouet. He will find a polite little note of regret for our inevitable absence awaiting him at the hotel.'

'You wished to avoid him, then?'

'Exactly. Of course you understand what that means; but you are no gossip, I know, so it is of no consequence. Now, my dear Alice, why *should* you look so disappointed? I never knew that you cared much about his society yourself.'

'He never bestowed enough of his attention on me to make me do that,' said Alice. 'But from some things that Juliet

Chaloner, and other people too, wrote to me this spring, I hoped——'

'And why should you "*hope*"?' interrupted Madame d'Yffiniac, rather sharply. 'I suppose because he is rich and well-connected and popular, and could give the literary adventuress the conventionally assured name and position which even you cannot cure yourself of thinking so preferable to that she has won for herself.'

'Yes—partly that,' replied Alice frankly. 'I will not deny that I should like you to be in a good position in the ordinary sense of the word, as well as in one of your own making. But I was chiefly thinking that it would be pleasant to see you in a happy home instead of alone. I fancied, too, that you liked him.'

'So I do, as a pleasant friend, but not in any other way,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac.

‘That may come,’ suggested Alice. ‘At least, give both him and yourself a fair chance. There can be no need to decide so hastily.’

‘There is every need to put an end at once to all such ideas. Even if I did care for him in that way, which fortunately I do not, and never could do, it would make no difference. Years ago, Alice, I put some of my principles into practice in my own life, and *any* marriage is absolutely out of the question for me. If I ever tell my story to anyone, I will tell it to you ; but that cannot be now—it may be perhaps when we are both old women. Now, here we are at the end of our journey.’

Madame d’Yffiniac’s tone and manner were even more silencing than her words, and made a painful impression on Alice; they told so clearly of some sorrow too bitter ever to be forgotten, of some wound too

deep to have healed even in all these years. It was a relief that the little bustle of arriving made the abrupt ending of their conversation less awkward.

Madame d'Yffiniac was well known at the inn where they stopped, and had a friendly word and jest for the landlord who came out to welcome them. Alice was by this time quite used to the ways of these village 'Hôtels,' and followed her with amused interest, but without any surprise, into the untidy and not over-clean little kitchen, where the landlady was busily preparing dishes for which a wrinkled old peasant *bonne* was waiting. Both greeted Madame d'Yffiniac warmly, and the old woman bustled off to usher them through the door which led direct from the kitchen into the tiny *salle*, and to arrange places for them at the table, where several men were already seated at breakfast.

Alice's recent experiences made her feel tolerably confident that, notwithstanding the homely surroundings and the unpromising look of things, the fare would be more than passable, and the company (when drawn out by Madame d'Yffiniac) probably rather entertaining.

She was not disappointed. The landlady could cook, and the old waitress, amidst incessant 'chaff' and jests with all the party, for she was evidently a privileged character, attended carefully to everybody's wants. Madame d'Yffiniac could always make herself at home in any company, however mixed it might be, and seldom failed to extract something either useful or amusing from everyone with whom she came in contact. On the present occasion the talk before very long became general and rather excited, and Alice, as she listened, found herself wondering how Mr. Annesley

Mainwaring, with his reputed fastidious exclusiveness, would have liked it if he had heard and seen her in eager political discussion with a couple of *commis voyageurs* of the commonest type, a wandering photographer and a small local official.

When the meal was over, the two ladies, escorted by some of the children of the house as volunteers to carry their shawls and sketching-bags, set off to walk through the deep shady lanes and up the wooded hill to the place where they intended to spend their day.

The three convent-taught little girls were loquacious, and chatted away to Alice very readily during the walk, telling her a number of stories connected with the chapel to which they were bound, all, of course, turning on the history of 'La Sainte Barbe,' and on marvellous miracles worked by her in favour of faithful pilgrims to her

shrine, or of believers who trusted in her power.

Alice was interested and amused, and scarcely noticed Madame d'Yffiniac's unusual silence, until, on their reaching the broad grassy platform on the top of the hill, she suddenly roused herself and again joined in what was going on.

She dismissed the children with permission to come back at a given hour in the afternoon to carry the things down to the village again. Then, as she walked on alone with Alice, she said :

'I left you to the tender mercies of those children, for I thought they would cram you well with legendary lore, and put you in a proper frame of mind for this place.'

'They did their best,' replied Alice. 'I never knew much about "La Sainte Barbe" before ; but with her lonely studies and

independent spirit she seems to have been a most curiously appropriate patron saint for you to be called after.'

'Only, unluckily for that theory, I have no orthodox right to the name at all.'

'Do you mean that you were never baptized in the usual way, or that Barbe is not your real name?'

Madame d'Yffiniac laughed; but it was a hard, artificial little laugh, with no real mirth in it.

'My *real* name?' she said mockingly. 'Well, it certainly ought to be accepted as such, for I chose it for myself after I came to years of discretion instead of that given to me while I was an unconscious infant by my godfathers and godmothers; but I am afraid St. Barbe cannot be expected to see it in that light, and so the rods for *my* scourging (metaphorically speaking, of course) will never be turned into feathers

at her intercession for me as one of her *protégées*.'

'And what is the real name which you disliked so much as to reject it deliberately for another ?'

'There was no harm in the name itself,' answered Madame d'Yffiniac, 'but when I chose my own career I had of necessity to choose a name also, for I then buried my past at once and for ever. Some day, Alice, as I said before, you shall know it all—and pity me or hate me as may be ; but I cannot tell you my story now—and till I do, no one else need know even so much as that I have one to tell. And now to lionise you properly before I settle down to a real day's work, which I mean to have, leaving you either to sketch, or read, or dream, as best fits in with the impression this place may make on your imagination.'

'I have brought a book to finish,' an-

swered Alice : ' an old one which I found on the shelves in my room yesterday, and which took my fancy so much that I really can't go away leaving it half read. But you speak as if we had reached our destination, and of lionising me; and I can see nothing but a sort of bare grassy down with a fringe of trees, and here and there glimpses of open low country, but without a vestige of either church or chapel, or of anything else that is interesting and romantic.'

' Wait a moment,' replied Madame d'Yffiniac lightly. ' Patience and faith are two admirable virtues, and, on the present occasion at any rate, will be amply rewarded without being put to any very severe test.'





CHAPTER VI.

‘**T**HAT old belfry among the trees on our left shows you the whereabouts of the famous chapel we have come to see,’ said Madame d’Yffiniac ; ‘but before we go to it, come on to the point and get a general view of the position.’

Alice obeyed, and in a few moments they reached the end of the hill, along the top of which they had been walking. It was a projecting spur from a range of high ground, and ran out into the plain like a promontory of cliffs into the sea; so that now, as they stood at the point, Alice found that

there was a sharp descent on three sides, and on one of them not to the open country, but to a deep ravine between the hill on which they were and a similar one meeting it at an unexpected angle.

The steep rocky slopes, though there were trees in some places, were chiefly covered merely with heather and gorse and bracken in all the soft richness of their September colouring, while a considerable stream rushed noisily along the bottom of the gorge. It was a scene not unlike many to be found among the moors and hills of her own country, near the home she loved so well; and Alice, to whom no music was sweeter than the sound of running water over a rocky bed, and for whom heather and ferns had a charm infinitely beyond that of the rarest exotics, could have lingered there for any length of time without becoming impatient, and in fact did not notice that

Madame d'Yffiniac had left her, until, after a few moments' absence, she returned with some huge, rusty keys in her hand.

'Lovely, is it not?' she said. 'It takes one by surprise, too, to come out so suddenly on such a commanding position. I told you this would be an excursion not to be forgotten ; and we have a perfect day for it—such colouring, and such shadows over the plains from the variety of distances and the moving clouds! Now come and do your duty as to sight-seeing. I have got the keys from the old man in charge, and have told him to leave us alone. He knows me quite well. There is really nothing to see inside the buildings, but of course you must see them; and then you can wander about as you please while I settle down to work.'

As Madame d'Yffiniac ceased speaking she turned towards the wooded bank on

the left as if to descend into the ravine. Alice followed her, and the next moment exclaimed in astonishment. A few broad stone steps took them down to a small platform from which a bridge led at once into the Chapel of St. Barbe, which was perched on a solid perpendicular rock jutting out boldly from the hillside and almost overhanging the ravine. A double flight of grey stone stairs to the right and left led down respectively to the Church of St. Michael, buried in the wood, and to a grassy terrace below the bridge. There was little or nothing of architectural beauty in the church or chapel, and Alice had no wish to linger in either; but the fact of their existence in this wild secluded place as a mere pilgrims' shrine was a striking relic of the mediæval spirit of devotion, while the massive stone staircases, with the elaborate and graceful arches and balustrades

which supported and connected them, had almost a magical effect on the imagination when seen under such circumstances, apparently hanging on the steep hillside.

Madame d'Yffiniac very soon settled herself to work like an artist who really meant business. She had brought with her a large sketch begun on a previous occasion, but which had been left untouched until she should again be on the spot under similar conditions of both light and foliage, and all her available time to-day was to be devoted to finishing it. The place where she sat on the green terrace below the bridge was shaded by chestnut-trees, and as she looked through the arch it framed a beautiful view of the church, a bit of staircase, and all the accessories of wood and rock required to make a perfect picture, though one that needed care and time to do it justice.

Alice did not feel inclined to-day to profit by the opportunity of taking a valuable sketching lesson, and she was too restless even to sit near and read. She preferred to roam about as Madame d'Yffiniac had suggested, pausing here and there to admire, and meanwhile allowing thoughts and feelings and vague speculations to come and go in her mind as passing changes of mood stirred them successively into life. It was a strange medley of regrets and hopes and fears and fancies, and in theory no one would have more strongly reprobated such uncontrolled and purposeless dreaming; but in fact she was far too susceptible to external impressions not to indulge in it occasionally, and to-day she felt incapable of resisting it.

At last, however, she became weary and inclined to rest, and seated herself in the shade some little way down the bank, apart

and even out of sight, choosing, too, a place from which she could see no trace of either church or chapel, or of any work of man, nothing but rock and wood and water and soft melting distance, the curling column of blue smoke rising from an invisible cottage in the valley being the only sign of human life either past or present.

Leaning back against the trunk of a tree, and soothed by the beauty of the tranquil scene before her as well as by the sense of absolute solitude, Alice made a determined effort to regain complete control over herself, and resolved not to allow her mind to dwell any longer on all the cares and perplexities before her. She could not prepare herself to meet them by trying to anticipate the form which they might happen to take, and she felt therefore that she should do wisely not to think of them at all (if

she could help it) until she had to face them.

At a moment like the present the inevitable consequence of such a resolution as this was that her thoughts turned at once from her own troubles to those of Madame d'Yffiniac, whose words and manner that morning had made an uncomfortably deep impression upon her. Alice, in common with the rest of the world, had always felt that there must have been some very painful episode in Madame d'Yffiniac's early life which she not only desired should remain unknown to others, but which she would gladly forget herself, as far as it was possible to do so.

Rejecting with loyal indignation all the malicious insinuations on which a scandal-loving society rang the changes, Alice had from the first pinned her faith to the theory that her friend's marriage had been in some

way unfortunate, and that though the shell which ended her husband's life on the battle-field had happily soon set her free, there were bitter memories connected with that time which she could not bear to recall.

Alice's lively fancy had pictured the story to herself as that of a high-souled, warm-hearted, imaginative girl, whose passionate love for an ideal of her own had been chilled under the withering experience of intimate knowledge of her hero, until final separation, even by death, had seemed a blessed relief.

In such a case what could be more natural than that she should wish to consign the whole of that part of her life to oblivion? The recollection of the blind happiness of the beginning must have a sting almost more poignant than that of the utter wretchedness of the sequel.

This had always been Alice's explanation of Madame d'Yffiniac's strange and absolute reticence as to her early life, and she had been content to seek no other.

It seemed now, however, as if this hypothesis could be no longer tenable, for Madame d'Yffiniac had spoken of having changed her name in order 'to bury her past at once and for ever.' That admission must apply to the 'd'Yffiniac' as well as to the 'Barbe,' for a mere change of Christian name would have no effect of the kind. If she were not really 'Barbe d'Yffiniac'—if that were merely a name of her own choosing—then she could not be the widow of the Captain Raoul d'Yffiniac who had fallen at the battle of Gettysberg, having a few months before married Barbara Fairfax—and in that case the few facts hitherto supposed to have been ascertained about her collapsed entirely, and

there was nothing definite to guide conjecture.

Alice wondered whether such a domestic tragedy as she had conceived could have reached a higher point. Was she the widow of some criminal, severing herself from a reflected disgrace by leaving her country and changing her name? But she had said that 'she had put her principles in practice in her own life'—and that '*any* marriage must be absolutely out of the question for her'—and when Alice remembered what the principles were which she had been advocating at the moment, other ideas presented themselves to her mind.

Was she not a widow at all, but a wife who had been driven by disappointment and ill-treatment to leave some good-for-nothing husband, and (concealed under a false name) to live her separate life, fighting a gallant fight, and winning for the

name she had chosen the respect and admiration of a wide circle?

This guess appeared to fit the case better than any other, though it left some difficulties to be got over. Why, for instance, should she have chosen to personate some one else, instead of merely taking a fancy name? What could have been the inducement to do this, and what the justification? How could she have managed to do it so long and so successfully without protest or remonstrance either from the real owner of the name or from some one to whom the truth was known?

Alice amused herself by filling in the outline of the story with such details as seemed to her possible, and not too improbable, as an explanation of the mystery.

The real Barbe d'Yffiniac, when left childless and alone, was known to have gone to

Europe immediately to join some near relation, and Madame d'Yffiniac herself had once said that death alone had prevented the plan from being carried out. It must have been the death of the young widow herself (not that of the protecting relation, as had been assumed), and *her* name and place in the world must have been adopted as the safest disguise available. Probably the Madame d'Yffiniac now known to the world had been herself the relation sought, and in the utter confusion of American society at that time had easily effected the change without risk of discovery. The investigations once made by some English people travelling in America, had proved that the real Barbe d'Yffiniac had no discoverable relations surviving there, and not many friends. The few people who had known her were content to believe that she had settled in France, and to ask no further

questions about her, while she was in all likelihood the last person with whom the obnoxious husband of her friend or relation would attempt to keep up any communication after the supposed death of his wife.

All this might of course be as far as possible from the truth, but Alice felt that if her surmises were even approximately correct, they would furnish a sufficient explanation of the most puzzling parts of the story, for the inducement to personate some one who was dead and who could not therefore be injured by the attempt was obvious, since if it could be done successfully it must be the most safe and effectual concealment of identity; and the feasibility of carrying out such a scheme was made credible by the circumstances under which she thus imagined it to have been done.

The next point to be considered was more complicated. To break away from

your past and from every natural tie of duty in order to make a fresh life for yourself on lines of your own choosing, though a step needing (as Alice now fully recognised) ample justification, *might* be not only pardonable but imperative. Deliberately to adopt false colours and make your life at every moment an active and elaborate lie, was a different thing altogether, and one from which Alice's whole nature revolted. The mere suspicion that Madame d'Yffiniac had been doing this for years was so intolerable to her that she hastily resolved to indulge in no more speculations concerning this most irritating mystery. The real truth was very likely something widely different from these vague imaginings of hers, and she would at once dismiss the subject completely from her mind rather than doubt the essential truth and goodness and wisdom of the friend whom she had for so

long revered as well as loved, and to whom she believed herself to owe so much. Until the real facts should be made known to her, she would not try to guess them. She would not be guilty even in thought of such treachery to their friendship, of such base want of faith.

By way of assisting herself to change the current of her thoughts and shake off the suspicions which she was ashamed of entertaining even for a moment, Alice started somewhat impetuously from her mossy seat with a sudden determination to scramble down the hillside to the stream, and so get from below an entirely different view of this strange picturesque group of buildings. She had left all her encumbrances of shawls and sketching materials under Madame d'Yffiniac's care, and had carried about with her only the book, to finish which was to be part of her day's

amusement. It had been lying on her lap as she sat there ; but, forgetting this as she sprang up abruptly, the book fell to the ground, and opening as it fell, a couple of loose papers dropped out. Alice instantly stooped to pick them up and replace them. They were evidently leaves torn out of a small pocket sketch-book, and on each was a slight but clever sketch of mountain scenery. The touch and style were not Madame d'Yffiniac's, that Alice saw at a glance, and notwithstanding the heroic resolutions of the previous moment, her first instinctive impulse was of course to seek in them some possible solution of the mystery.

In the corner of each sketch was written the name of the place where it had been taken, and the date. The places were unmistakably German, and the date on both was the same day in August, 1864. There

was also on each sketch a monogram of the letters R. M., a hieroglyphic which struck Alice at once as being somewhat familiar to her. She looked back to the beginning of the book, but the fly-leaf had been torn out, and nothing was to be learned there. Then with a sense of impatient disgust at her own irrepressible humiliating curiosity, she was about to close the book again on the two sketches, when in replacing one of them, she perceived by a ruffled corner that *that* leaf had a drawing on both sides, having probably not been blank when torn from its original place. She turned it, expecting to see another view of the same kind, but started with a feeling of bewildered horror when an absolutely accurate sketch of Corbie's Pool met her eyes. To mistake it would have been in any case impossible to her, but to place it beyond all doubt this, like the others, was signed and dated. The

words 'Corbie's Pool—June, 1862,' stared her in the face with what she felt to be a scorching clearness, and under them was again that clear and distinct though twisted R. M.

The whole truth flashed on her at once and almost stunned her. She threw the book from her as if there were contamination in its touch, and covering her face with her hands, she sank back again into her seat under the tree in a breathless horror which for a time seemed to paralyse both body and mind. By degrees the first overpowering effect of the shock passed away. With a deep gasping breath she looked up, and then closing her eyes again as if the sight of the sunny peaceful landscape spread before her was too sharp a contrast to the misery from which she saw no escape, she leaned back in her former position, and with characteristic courage faced the consideration

of this startling discovery and of its consequences.

Everything fitted only too well. The real Barbe d'Yffiniac had evidently come to Europe to join the Robarts', and had probably died soon afterwards. In the following year they had met Roger Myddleton; and when eventually Marion had chosen to disappear, it had been easy enough for her to assume the character of a person intimately known to herself, and of whose existence he had very likely never heard. Further explanation as to facts seemed unnecessary. Alice felt that she knew enough, and that she did not care if she were never to learn all the sickening minutiae of the story.

She had fallen abruptly to a hitherto untouched depth of wretchedness, for let the after effects of this discovery of hers be what they might (or what she should

choose to make them) to others, she saw, without power of self-deception, that to herself it must mean the sudden and permanent loss of all that had been most precious to her. Both friend and lover must henceforth be as dead to her.

While Roger Myddleton's wife was an unknown shadow, whose continued existence even was uncertain, and the discovery of whose death might at any moment remove the barrier between them, Alice had felt justified in considering that they were virtually bound to each other by the sacred tie of mutual affection, and in allowing that affection to be the ruling influence of her life. It had been possible to her, even through the past long year of absence and silence, to feel that their separation was a mere temporary accident, a caprice of fate from which they could not escape, but which, trying though it might be to bear,

was in no way incompatible with their being united in heart and spirit by perfect love and sympathy. In that thought she had found her truest help and consolation in trouble and sorrow, while all her hope of a brighter future had lain in the conviction (almost unconsciously entertained) that every obstacle to their happiness would certainly disappear before long. If this indulgence of her natural feelings had been an error, the weakness was dearly paid for now, when she could no longer blind herself to the necessity of ruthlessly stamping them out.

Every feminine instinct in Alice's mind revolted from the idea of continuing to cherish a passionate attachment, an absorbing devotion, to a man whose wife she now knew not only as a living woman but as an intimate friend of her own; and she did not even try to delude herself into a belief that friendship, worth calling by the name, could

ever be safe or possible between them. She knew that Roger must be everything to her—or nothing. She recognised this with all the uncompromising frankness characteristic of even her closest self-communing, and therefore she felt that if she cared either to preserve her own self-respect or to act in accordance with the principles she had learned from him, she must henceforward unflinchingly banish him from her thoughts as far as it was in her power to do so, and must cease to make her love and reverence for him the key-note of her life.

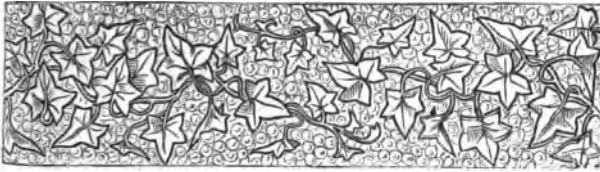
The consciousness of her own youth and strength filled her with dismay. The life before her looked so blank and dreary, and yet would in all likelihood last so long!

‘Early death or troubled life.’

The words kept sounding in Alice's ears, and she could not help feeling that those

'daughters of Sir Brian's line' who, after having like herself seen the fatal Cross, had fallen victims to the predicted 'early death' instead of to the 'troubled life,' had been blessed rather than cursed. But following quick on the involuntary longing for death as the only sure escape from a joyless sorrow-laden life, came the higher thought that if indeed length of life were to be given to her, she must force herself to look on it not as a penance to be endured, but as a trust to be accounted for, and must summon all her courage and faith to aid her in proving herself capable of using it worthily.





CHAPTER VII.

WHEN the first shock was over, Alice was able to bear with tolerable calmness and resignation the conviction that her separation from Colonel Myddleton was final and complete. There was no bitterness in that trial—neither of them was to blame—it was simply the decree of inexorable fate, and as such it must be accepted and borne; but when at last she could no longer keep her thoughts from turning to Madame d'Yffiniac (it was impossible to think of her as yet under any other name), she could be neither

calm nor charitable. The friend who had long been so much to her, and who since her mother's death had been more to her than anyone else in the world, save Roger Myddleton himself, could from this moment be less than nothing to her; and the death of their friendship was unmixed pain of the worst kind, stirring up every evil passion of her vehement nature in its fullest force. The more she dwelt on every circumstance of the case the more impossible she felt it to forgive any part of Madame d'Yffiniac's conduct, whether towards Roger Myddleton or towards herself, and the stronger grew the longing to see her suffer for what she had done.

That it was in her own power to punish as severely as she could desire, Alice had no doubt whatever. Madame d'Yffiniac had ruthlessly sacrificed both husband and friend to her own heartless, obstinate pride,

and that pride was now at Alice's mercy. She could deal as she chose with the secret she had accidentally discovered, and she knew that if it pleased her to do so she could make it an instrument of the keenest torture and humiliation. She had been basely and treacherously treated, and she should not scruple to revenge herself; though she could not as yet decide exactly what form her revenge should take.

But sweet as the prospect of retaliation might be, it could not really deaden the pain arising either from the consciousness of having been deceived and trifled with by a friend whom she had loved so dearly and trusted so entirely, or from her desolate sense of the loneliness before her in the future; and though she tried to believe herself too justly indignant to grieve, she was more dispirited than she had ever been before.

For a time Alice certainly did find a vague consolation in dwelling on the thought of her own power to deal with Madame d'Yffiniac's secret as she should choose; but as the hours passed and the first bewildering whirl of conflicting emotions subsided, she found herself not a little puzzled by the practical question of how, after all, she *should* use the power which it had given her such triumphant satisfaction to think that she possessed. It was not an easy question to answer. Madame d'Yffiniac must know that her secret was no longer in her own keeping—that was the one point which seemed to admit of no doubt; for apart from the desire to inflict punishment, Alice felt that a friendship such as theirs had been could not be suddenly broken without explanation—and broken it must infallibly be by the mere fact of her knowledge of the truth.

The recollection of that day in the Brianskirk woods a year ago must make even the semblance of further friendship or intimacy between them for ever impossible. She could not recall it without the most bitter and passionate resentment. All her pulses throbbed with anger as she thought of the pressure that had then been so skilfully applied, first to force from her a tacit confidence, and then to induce her to marry Eliot St. Aubyn, merely because it was the most convenient way of preventing further complications which might at last have reduced even Madame d'Yffiniac to consider it necessary to make known the truth.

Alice was only deterred from at once springing up and seeking Madame d'Yffiniac to overwhelm her with an outpouring of just and righteous wrath and contempt by the recollection that any

such discussion between them must be attended by very serious drawbacks. Any altercation on such a subject would be inexpressibly degrading, yet Alice felt that although Madame d'Yffiniac could have no adequate excuse to offer for any part of her conduct, she might nevertheless, if driven to bay, exercise a power of retort which would be none the less intolerable for being unjustifiable.

And what after all would be the end of it? Must Roger Myddleton know the truth? and if he knew it what would he do—how would it affect him? It would be scarcely possible that he should deliberately allow things to go on in their present state; yet, what change could fail to bring increased wretchedness and mortification to himself and everyone else? To acknowledge the marriage and then to agree upon a continued separation

would simply be to offer the story as a *bonne bouche* to the gossip and scandal-loving section of society, and to expose everyone concerned in it to ridicule. Yet what else could be done, if anything were done at all? Reconciliation *must* be out of the question. Alice recalled with a thrill of genuine exultation not only Roger's stern, relentless condemnation of his wife's conduct, but also his strong, deeply-rooted prejudice against all that he knew, or believed himself to know, of the 'Madame d'Yffiniac' who held so conspicuous a position in the world—a prejudice against which she herself had so often and so warmly protested!

Would it not be better to let him remain in ignorance of this discovery, since nothing but annoyance and embarrassment could result from his knowing of it? She was almost inclined to decide that it

would; but Madame d'Yffiniac would most certainly wish to have this course adopted, and that conviction was naturally a strong inducement to Alice to reject it as inadmissible. Subsequently, however, it occurred to her that she should really inflict even keener humiliation by the scornful assurance that, though henceforward they must be strangers to each other, the secret was safe in her keeping since she would never voluntarily expose Roger to the useless pain of knowing it.

But Alice had no sooner made up her mind to treat the matter in this way than a totally different view of the question suggested itself to her. Had not Roger a *right* to know a fact which so nearly concerned him? Should she, knowing it, be justified in withholding the knowledge from him? The more she thought about it the more convinced she became

that she ought to tell him exactly what had happened, and then leave him to decide for himself how he would use the knowledge thus conveyed to him. Then it began slowly to dawn upon her that the really best and noblest way for him to use it would be to seek a reconciliation with his wife, and at least to *try* whether they could not live in harmony together: he would think this right, therefore he would choose to do it, let the cost to himself be what it might. And the thought of this was utterly intolerable to Alice.

She told herself vehemently and repeatedly that it *could* not be her duty to force him into the position of having no choice but either deliberately to decline even to attempt to do what he would feel to be his duty, or else to sacrifice his life to the wretched slavery of an uncongenial marriage. He would not hesitate

—as to that she had now no doubt—but she could save him from such a miserable fate by being silent. And once more she decided on keeping her unfortunate discoveries to herself.

She soon found, however, that she was as far as ever from having reached a haven of rest, for self-deception in any form was too foreign to her nature to be possible for any length of time, and conscience whispered that her extreme repugnance to the idea of a reunion between the husband and wife who had been separated so long, did not arise entirely from a single-hearted anxiety to save him from having to make the sacrifice of exchanging his present freedom for the fetters of domestic life under such conditions, but even more from a secret dread lest those fetters might prove in the end less galling to him than she had chosen to assume that they must be.

Madame d'Yffiniac was handsome, clever, and strangely interesting. She had loved him once with all the depth and strength of a passionate and tenacious nature (Alice had never doubted that, even when the Marion of his story was still to her a mere impersonal shadow), and though morbid sensitiveness and wounded pride must have had power to stifle all other feelings until it had seemed too late ever to retract the first false step, Alice firmly believed that she loved him still.

Innumerable trifling recollections all tended to convince her of this, and she was sure that if he, on learning the truth, were now to take the initiative and generously insist on offering entire oblivion of the past, the objections on Madame d'Yffiniac's side would be easily overruled.

And what would follow ? Alice felt that notwithstanding the wide divergence of

their views on almost every conceivable subject, it was not only possible, but horribly, distractingly probable, that they might end by being quite happy together. She could see it all. In the beginning Roger would be kind and forbearing in the highest degree, from a sense of duty and from chivalrous generosity ; but the absolute devotion which a woman like Madame d'Yffiniac *could*—and under such circumstances certainly *would*—give, must, in the long run, prove irresistible.

Alice felt an inward conviction that this would be so eventually if she now brought them together. But thus to reward Madame d'Yffiniac for her indefensible treatment of herself by the voluntary gift of the happiness which ought to have been her own would need a degree of magnanimous self-abnegation which was quite beyond her. It was at her option to bestow it or to with-

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hold it, and—*right* or *wrong*—she should withhold it. The mere thought of such an ending to the story was more than she could bear to face, and it again fixed her resolution to make no further use of what she had discovered than to tell Madame d'Yffiniac, in a few cold, stinging sentences, that she had learned the truth and that their friendship was henceforward a thing of the past, but that she should keep the secret inviolate, since to betray it could only cause useless annoyance to——

‘ Alice ! Alice ! ’

The sound of her name in Madame d'Yffiniac's clear ringing tones interrupted Alice's stormy meditations, and she started hurriedly to her feet to find that she was being summoned to return to the village.

Hours had passed like minutes—she had observed neither changing lights nor lengthening shadows ; and now, on being

thus suddenly recalled to a consciousness of the outer world, she first began to feel the physical effects of the shock she had experienced.

Too sick and giddy for the moment to walk or even to stand, she leaned against the nearest tree, struggling with an overpowering sense of suffocation.

Madame d'Yffiniac's voice called her again; she saw the little girls from the inn running down the bank towards her, and by a violent effort she recovered sufficient control over her power of both movement and speech to desire the children to run back and tell the lady that she was following them, and would be with her immediately. Then, as her eyes fell on the fatal book which lay on the ground at her feet, she yielded to an impulse of repulsion prompting her to seek any escape from touching it, and calling back the eldest

child, she told her to pick up the book and carry it to the lady, and ask her to put it in the bag with all the sketching-things.

The child did as she was bid, and ran off merrily with her sisters to give the messages to Madame d'Yffiniac.

Alice followed more slowly, trying to nerve herself for the meeting before her. But when a heart and brain have been for several hours in such an extreme and painful state of tension, it is no easy task to reduce them to order; and the one conclusion to which Alice came during the few minutes which she spent in returning to the top of the hill, was, that cost her what it might to restrain the impulse to speak, she must for the present be silent. The mere sound of Madame d'Yffiniac's voice stirred her to such a pitch of indignant excitement that she dared not trust

herself to enter on the subject of her wrongs. She felt herself incapable of doing it with either the reticence or the composure which alone could ensure her the command of the situation. She must not risk breaking down and betraying the nervous agitation which yet she knew that she could not control except by absolute repression. She must keep silence for the few hours during which it was inevitable that she should continue to be Madame d'Yffiniac's guest; and what she had to say must be said by a letter from a distance, for written words could be few and telling—could be made to sting no less sharply than spoken reproaches—and need not betray the writer's weakness.

She was to leave Quimperlé at six the next morning to start on her journey home, so that in little more than twelve hours the worst would be over; and horrible

as it was to her to have to dissemble for even that short time, she felt that she must force herself to do it sufficiently to avoid an explanatory scene while every nerve was quivering.

‘I thought you must have fallen asleep while meditating on St. Barbe and her adventures,’ began Madame d’Yffiniac as Alice came up to her; then suddenly changing her tone, she exclaimed: ‘But what is the matter, Alice? Have you hurt yourself? Are you ill? You look——’

‘Ill? Oh no!’ interrupted Alice. ‘I am never ill, you know, and I have not hurt myself; but I am rather tired, I think. I wandered about for a long time, and it was very hot, and then I sat down to rest and read.’

‘And fell asleep over your book, and were startled when I woke you by calling?’

'I was not asleep,' Alice answered, still in the same voice so unlike her own; 'but I was thinking and dreaming, and forgot how time was passing, and when your call roused me I came so suddenly to my senses that I still feel dazed and stupid.'

'You have come to the end of your holiday too soon,' said Madame d'Yffiniac, 'and the worries and anxieties awaiting you at home are asserting their power in anticipation, I fear. You are not strong enough yet to bear them with impunity, and I don't half like letting you pass out of my care yet, my child.'

This was almost more than Alice could bear without an outbreak of anger and sorrow. Madame d'Yffiniac was by no means naturally demonstrative, and Alice had always felt that the caressing 'my child,' which was a term reserved exclusively for herself, was a precious proof of

affection. Now it seemed an intolerable insult, and she could scarcely command herself to let it pass in silence. She succeeded, however, in doing so, and Madame d'Yffiniac seeing that she was really tired and out of sorts, whatever the cause might be, wisely left her to herself, and encouraged the children to chatter without intermission during the walk back to the village.

Alice desired above all things to escape questions and comments, and forced herself therefore to sit through the long noisy dinner as if nothing were amiss with her; in truth, she dreaded so much the *tête-à-tête* drive which must follow it, that the end came sooner than she wished. As soon as they were in the carriage and had started homewards, Madame d'Yffiniac spoke kindly and authoritatively.

‘Something—the sun or worry, no matter which—has knocked you up, Alice;

and you have a long journey before you to-morrow, so you must keep quiet now. The cool evening air as we drive home will do you more good than anything else. We won't talk, and you must try not to think if you can help it. You have done more than enough of that already to-day, I suspect.'

How Alice chafed under this expression of the tender care for which she had hitherto been so grateful! It strained her power of self-control to the utmost to answer without betraying herself, but she did it.

'I *am* rather tired and good-for-nothing,' she said very quietly, 'and I shall be glad to follow your advice and not talk, for my head aches a good deal.'

She leaned back in her corner, keeping herself as far from Madame d'Yffiniac as she could, and closed her eyes.

The sunset was over, but the moonlight

effects were lovely as they drove down the valley. Madame d'Yffiniac was however left to admire them alone, for Alice remained so silent and still that she might almost have been supposed to be sleeping. On reaching home they went at once to their rooms, for they had to keep early hours the next morning. Alice was thankful to feel that there could be no time then for conversation, or for anything but the actual business of a start on a long journey.

'Try to sleep off your headache,' said Madame d'Yffiniac as she stood for a moment at Alice's door. 'If it is not better in the morning I shall not allow you to go. I shall telegraph to Mr. Brandon that I have kept you here.'

'I shall be all right in the morning,' replied Alice hastily. 'My headaches never last, you know ; and anyhow, go I *must*.'

Madame d'Yffiniac looked at her gravely and anxiously, feeling sure that some real trouble had caused this headache ; but she attributed it to the contents of the home letters of the previous day. The truth did not occur to her for a moment, and with a kind 'good-night' she went away.

Alice was to start at so early an hour the next morning, that although she appeared with laudable punctuality at the time appointed for breakfast, she had no difficulty in managing that there should not be a moment to spare from all the inevitable bustle of preparation and leave-taking. She was quiet and self-possessed, and declared herself perfectly well, though she could not be said to look as if it were true. She occupied herself with her farewells to the old servants, and filled up the minutes until the omnibus from the hotel called to take her to the station. Madame

d'Yffiniac went with her to see her off, but as Alice's maid was with them, they had of course no private conversation. Just at the last moment, after Alice had taken her seat in the railway carriage, Madame d'Yffiniac said affectionately :

‘I wish I had not been obliged to part with you so soon. You don't do my care quite as much credit as I had hoped you would. I know it can't be helped—your father wants you, and you must go—but I have enjoyed having you so much, that I shall ask for you again another summer.’

Something Alice must say in reply. The contrast between the hatred which it was now costing her so much to stifle, and the loving gratitude which she would have been trying to express had they only parted twenty-four hours sooner, was horrible to her, and for the moment sorrow conquered anger. Their friendship was

over, but it had been very precious to her while it lasted, and her eyes filled with tears and her voice broke as she leaned forward and said hurriedly :

‘I cannot speak what I have to say—I will write——’

Madame d’Yffiniac smiled ; she believed that Alice was ‘upset’ by her grief at having to go, and that she hated herself for being so childish.

‘I hope you *will* write—soon and fully,’ she said lightly. ‘But between you and me, Alice, I don’t think there is much need of words at such a time as this—we understand each other too well.’

To Alice’s intense relief the signal was given for starting—Madame d’Yffiniac drew back from the carriage—there was a gesture of farewell on each side—and then the train moved on.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘**I** AM so sorry that we don’t happen to know anyone who is crossing to-night and who would have looked after you.’

‘I am quite equal to looking after myself, I assure you.’

‘Yes, and you have a good maid too ; still, it is always pleasanter to have a man to fall back upon in case of any emergency.’

Alice Brandon laughed.

‘That depends a good deal on the man !’ she said. ‘Nine out of ten of those I know

would be simply a nuisance on a voyage like this. And really, Mr. Estcourt has arranged everything for me so perfectly that even if we should not have so good a passage as we are promised, I could not help being comfortable.'

'I can't associate "*comfort*" with any conceivable crossing of the Channel,' replied Mrs. Estcourt; 'but a deck cabin gives one the nearest approach to it, and that we secured for you.'

'You were very kind,' answered Alice, 'and if it should rain, or turn very cold, I shall be thankful for it; otherwise I shall stay outside and enjoy a moonlight night at sea. I am a good sailor, you know, and am only afraid that there may not be breeze enough for pleasure.'

Mrs. Estcourt shrugged her shoulders.

'Well! Here comes my husband to say that we must go on shore again now, as you

will be off immediately. I am so glad to have seen you even for this one day in passing.'

Alice had spent a couple of nights at Dinard with these friends, and they were now seeing her off from St. Mâlo. She expected to reach Southampton early enough the next morning to catch a mid-day train in London, by which she could be at Earnscliffe late the same evening. The visit to the Estcourts, who were merely rather intimate acquaintances, not real friends, had been very trying to her, and she looked forward to the solitary voyage and journey as a kind of resting-time in which to collect her thoughts and brace her nerves to meet all the troubles awaiting her at home.

It was a fine clear evening, and desiring her maid, who by no means shared her love of the sea, to lie down at once in their small

cabin and to think only of making herself as comfortable as she could under the circumstances, Alice carried off some cushions and wraps and made a nest for herself quite at the stern of the vessel and rather apart from the rest of the passengers. The air was deliciously fresh, and seemed to give her new life.

The towns and ramparts of St. Mâlo showed to advantage in the sunset glow, which also tinted with rose-colour the creamy foam dashing up against the scattered islands of grey rock, while the gleaming light on the wet sands of Dinard completed a lovely picture.

Alice gazed at it and even commented to herself on its beauty; but though she was unconsciously refreshed and strengthened, and indeed always retained a vivid impression of the scene, her mind seemed to herself to be entirely concentrated on the difficult

question of how to word two notes which she had firmly resolved to write as soon as she was at home.

During the two days which had passed since her leaving Quimperlé, she had thought incessantly of all that had happened; whenever she could escape from the claims of social duty she had spent her time in going over the same ground again and again, and as her first excitement gradually cooled down she had been able to think with the desire of really deciding what it was right to do. She had struggled through all the varying phases of feeling between vindictive passion and Christian charity, and had no longer any doubt of what she ought to do, or any hesitation as to doing it; but she knew that the task she had set herself was almost too hard for her, and that it would tax her moral courage and force

to the utmost not to flinch from carrying out her intentions.

Roger Myddleton and Madame d'Yffiniac must both know from herself all that had come to her knowledge, and must then each settle as they chose how they would act.

When once the bewildering mist of emotion springing from anger and jealousy had been dispersed by steady reflection, Alice had seen clearly enough that it was her undoubted duty simply to tell them what she had so accidentally discovered, and that there her responsibility in the matter ended.

She should no more be justified in withholding the revelation because she doubted how it would affect the two lives which it touched the most directly, than because she did *not* doubt how it would affect her own. In fact, however, the

more she thought of it all, the stronger grew her conviction that when she had done her part a little time would be all that would be needed to bring about a sufficiently good understanding between them to make a very promising foundation for a happy married life.

It could not be even yet a welcome prospect, but Alice had recoiled in such horror and disgust from some of the thoughts and wishes concerning Madame d'Yffiniac which had passed through her mind in the first hours of uncontrolled feeling, that she now tried hard to persuade herself that she should really rejoice in seeing Roger happy, even if he owed that happiness to the friend who had treated her so unfairly.

As to Madame d'Yffiniac herself, Alice had been too deeply wounded to forgive so soon; but though she felt that it was

impossible to be in charity with her, she was thankful that she had been able to restrain herself from impetuous speech, and fully intended to make her note as short as possible, simply stating the facts, and avoiding all the stinging phrases which at first it had been a relief to her to invent.

Of her own future Alice scarcely dared to think; she could only resolve to bear it bravely, whatever it might be.

Time passed quickly, and it was growing dusk, when one of the gentlemen passengers came up and asked some trifling question of the captain of the boat, who for the moment was standing near Alice. The voice arrested her attention at once; she could never fail anywhere or at any time to recognise it—she was sure she could not be mistaken—and looking quickly round she saw, as she expected, Roger

Myddleton standing within a yard of her.

She saw that he had not as yet recognised her, for the same reasons that she had not suspected his presence until she heard his voice ; she had been looking away over the sea, almost turning her back on her fellow-passengers, and now the captain stood directly between them, screening her from view.

She was taken by surprise, for she had believed him to be at Brianskirk, where she knew that he had returned in the spring, and where he had spent the greater part of the summer ; and she was glad to have a few moments' respite in which to subdue her agitation before speaking to him.

She had often wondered lately whether her own return to Earnscliffe would drive him away again for the winter, or whether

(men were so different from women in such things) he might not have already learned to look on their love for each other as so completely a thing of the past that they could now have no difficulty in meeting as . friends—indeed, one of the worst of the many miseries of the last day or two had been a vague dread that he might even feel it possible to go on living at Brianskirk with Madame d'Yffiniac as his wife.

The captain very soon moved away, and Colonel Myddleton's recognition of Alice was instantaneous.

'Miss Brandon !' he exclaimed in astonishment. 'I had not a notion that you were on board.'

The tone of his voice, his look and manner, as he moved close to her side and shook hands with her, all told Alice as plainly as any words could have done that

the previous summer was as fresh in his memory as in her own. She left it to him to speak, and for a few moments there was silence.

‘You are on your way home, I suppose?’ he said at last. ‘But surely you are not alone?’

‘Marryatt is in that deck-cabin, undergoing ignominious miseries, poor thing ! but on such a night as this is going to be I much prefer staying outside, and you see I have taken care to make myself extremely comfortable. But how do *you* happen to be here ? I fancied you were at Brianskirk. I have heard of you as being there all the summer.’

‘Yes. I have been there, off and on, ever since Easter. But a friend of mine, who is living at Dinan, and who is a hopelessly crippled invalid, wanted me to go to see him, and I have just been there. That

is how I come to be here. I am on my way back now. You have been away for a long time—you will find some considerable changes.'

'You mean that the Chaloners have given up Clifton Grange,' said Alice.

'Yes. When Earnscliffe was shut up Clifton apparently became insupportably dull, and they fled,' replied Colonel Myddleton. 'I am afraid you will miss them a good deal.'

'Perhaps I shall—in some ways,' said Alice, rather gravely. 'But I am glad on the whole—it is better so. Everything is different with us now, and our ways would no longer suit them.'

'Then, at the rectory,' said Colonel Myddleton—'was it a shock to you to hear of the two little girls being sent to school?'

'I was surprised, but I thought it almost

too good news to be true,' answered Alice, with evident sincerity.

'That is pleasant hearing for me,' said Colonel Myddleton; 'for Vaughan and I concocted that plan between us, and urged it on your uncle. We put it on the plea that Bertha's health at present unfits her for the charge of them; but it was a necessary step anyhow, I think. Still, I know you object to school-girls, so I was rather afraid you might disapprove of our interference.'

'No. I think you were quite right,' replied Alice. 'A good school is much better than home education in some cases. I suppose you know that Uncle Laurence is soon going to leave Earnscliffe altogether? He has had a better living given to him in the south.'

'So I heard from Bertha the other day; and I was glad to hear it, for I think it will

suit them better. And though you may be sorry in some ways to lose him from Earnscliffe, on the whole I suspect you will gain by his going to live at a distance, and coming to visit you occasionally. Bertha is of too exacting a temper to have allowed your former pleasant daily intercourse to go on with any comfort to any of you. Now, in an entirely fresh neighbourhood where there are no old associations which she cannot share to excite her jealousy, and no ties which she can fancy clash with her own claims, there may, I hope, be some chance of a quiet life for him. She will have him and this new baby absolutely to herself, and also she will enjoy the position, I think, for it is one of considerable importance in that part of the world, and is not unlikely, if well filled, to lead on to higher things. Bertha's income, too, will help them to live well up to it socially; and if she gets it into her head

that a certain amount of representation is the right thing, and goes in for it, she will do it well enough, and will give up all the nonsensical economies which have been so wasteful as well as so uncomfortable.'

Alice laughed, and then sighed.

'Yes. I admit that it is better for them to leave Earnscliffe,' she said, 'and though she hates me so cordially that I doubt whether Uncle Laurence will ever be allowed to come and stay with us, it will be more tolerable never to see him—or very seldom, at any rate—than to live within a quarter of a mile of each other and have incessant jars and jealousies going on and wearing us all out.'

'It will be an important matter to you to whom your father gives the living now,' said Colonel Myddleton.

'I shall be allowed a veto—if not the absolute choice,' was Alice's reply. 'Nothing

has been said about Jessie in any of my letters; but I suppose when they have moved to a safe distance from Earnscliffe Mrs. Carr will wish to have her at home again.'

'At last I find my news in advance of yours,' said Colonel Myddleton. 'I have no doubt a letter from Jessie is awaiting you at Earnscliffe to announce her engagement and very speedy marriage.'

Alice exclaimed, and inquired particulars. She heard that the gentleman was a connection of the Randolphs, of suitable age, of good birth, and of comfortable though not large fortune. In fact, as Colonel Myddleton concluded, 'Nothing could be more satisfactory or less interesting than this ending to Jessie's childish attempt at romance.'

After a few comments on both sides, their respective budgets of news seemed to be

exhausted, and a rather long silence followed. They had hitherto been talking resolutely on the surface, while conscious all the time of an undercurrent of agitation. Colonel Myddleton felt that it was unsatisfactory and even unnatural to meet Alice thus for the first time since all her sorrows and to make no allusion to them—give no expression to the sympathy which he had so fully and freely bestowed; yet for Alice's sake even more than for his own he scarcely dared to trust himself to speak.

Alice meanwhile was thinking and feeling a hundred different things at once, and was utterly unable to make up her mind whether or not to use the opportunity thus offered to her of speaking instead of writing what she had to tell him. One moment she felt that to speak would be to inflict such needless torture on herself that it was virtually impossible to attempt it, while the next

brought a sudden and almost irresistible longing to profit by this chance of getting the thing over without further delay, of depriving herself of all possibility of again turning faint-hearted, and of knowing at once how it was all to end. Suspense seemed intolerable, yet she shrank from the certainty which she felt must follow when she had told her story.

‘Lady Elizabeth Randolph is a good correspondent,’ said Colonel Myddleton, at last breaking the silence. ‘I have heard of you constantly all this past year, and have often wished that I could tell you something at least of what I felt; but I trusted to your taking my sympathy for granted, and I thought it better—I was sure you would prefer—that I should not write to you.’

‘I knew without your writing,’ Alice answered. ‘It has been a terrible year

to us in all ways. Now, I am thankful to say that my father has very fairly recovered both health and spirits.'

'I have been glad to think of your being able at last to take a holiday yourself,' said Colonel Myddleton, relieved by the quiet matter-of-fact tone of her answer. 'You must have sorely needed rest and change ; and I know that you could not easily have had them in a more acceptable form than in a visit to Madame d'Yffiniac in her own home. It was what you have so often wished for. It ought to have been longer, though. You could not be spared, I suppose, but you look scarcely up to contending with home life again.'

Alice did not answer immediately, and being too nervous to feel at ease during a pause, Colonel Myddleton went on :

'Has Madame d'Yffiniac anything interesting on hand now? Are we to

be edified with another novel this year?’

A sudden impulse, as was not unusual with Alice, by prompting her to speak at once, finally settled the question which had been harassing her.

‘I have something to say to you,’ she said abruptly. ‘I was going to have written to you as soon as I got home, but as we have met in this way perhaps I had better tell you now. It seems right that I should, I think. I would very much rather never have known it, but I found it all out accidentally, and——’

She stopped in her hurried speech to recover breath and composure before coming to the point.

‘I am sorry if you have learned anything that gives you pain,’ said Colonel Myddleton kindly. ‘But you cannot expect me to be surprised if you have been at last dis-

enchanted, for I have always believed that it would be only a question of time, you know.'

'But it is much more than merely that,' interrupted Alice. 'I scarcely know how to tell you about it, yet I must do it. She is not really Madame d'Yffiniac at all. She never had any right to the name; she only took it as a disguise when, to use her own words, she wanted "to bury her past at once and for ever"——'

'Pretty much the sort of thing I guessed,' Colonel Myddleton said, as Alice's agitation again made her pause lest she should break down altogether; 'and it is better that you should have found out the truth at last. It has been hard for you just for the moment, no doubt; and I am so sorry for that, that I really feel only a very little spiteful pleasure in having my ill-natured suspicions justified.'

You must not grudge me that, for it is irresistible.'

'Oh, don't!' Alice exclaimed with a tone and gesture of such earnest repression as to puzzle him completely. 'I cannot bear to hear you say that before you know all. What I have told you so far is what I *know*—she said it. But since that I have found out what makes me think—indeed makes me sure—that she is your wife.'

Colonel Myddleton was effectually roused out of his usual calm self-possession.

'Impossible!' he replied. 'Madame d'Yffiniac and Marion the same! What could put such an extraordinary idea into your head?'

'It is not fancy,' said Alice gravely. 'I will tell you exactly what happened, and what I know, and what I suspect, and then you can judge for yourself as to what it all means.'

The first plunge into the subject once made, Alice's nerves had recovered their steadiness, and she now with perfect composure repeated to Colonel Myddleton exactly what had passed between Madame d'Yffiniac and herself; she described her accidental discovery of the sketch afterwards, and the conclusions which she had drawn from it, and simply added:

'I have thought it over incessantly ever since, and though at first I doubted as to what I ought to do about it, I am sure now that it must be right for me to tell you all I know.'

'Quite right. But you have not told *her*, I hope?'

'Not yet. I could not trust myself to speak to her about it. I was afraid of saying what I should be sorry for afterwards, so I waited to write. You think, then, as I do, that it must be so?'

‘It seems impossible to doubt it,’ replied Colonel Myddleton in a tone which puzzled and almost frightened Alice; ‘but of course I shall take measures at once to find out. That will be easily done without betraying to her that her secret is known.’

‘But she will know that from me,’ began Alice.

‘I hope that you will tell her nothing,’ he interposed quickly. ‘It is well that *I* should know the truth; *she* knows it already; but let us each keep our knowledge to ourselves, and so avoid the horrors of explanatory scenes.’

Alice looked up at him anxiously. She could not understand his manner, or reconcile it with her previous knowledge of him.

‘I thought that you would have gone to her at once yourself,’ she said, with a little hesitation.

‘To claim her tenderly and enthusiastically as my long lost wife, I suppose!’ he exclaimed, with bitter sarcasm. ‘No, thank you. She has shown clearly enough that she prefers an independent life—and so, most assuredly, do I. For Heaven’s sake, Alice, let things rest as they are, and spare me personal collision with her! She seems very well able to take care of herself; but I shall keep watch over her for the future, and if she should ever come to grief I will give her all needful help and protection. While she is prosperous, I should prefer to have nothing to do with her.’

Alice was silent, for he was taking a line so at variance with everything she had expected from him that she scarcely knew what to think or say.

‘She has forfeited all claim on me—no one could think otherwise,’ he said, answering Alice’s silence as if it had been a spoken

protest. 'And apart from the question of our personal relations to each other, she is now in every way the sort of woman whom I particularly detest.'

Having pronounced this verdict with a rough decision very unlike his usual way of judging and speaking, Colonel Myddleton turned abruptly away and walked to the other end of the vessel, leaving Alice to collect her thoughts and realise the situation as best she might.





CHAPTER IX.

FOR the few moments that Colonel Myddleton remained in sight Alice looked after him, and then feeling stunned and bewildered by the suddenness of the crisis, and by the unexpected form it was taking, she leaned back, and closing her eyes, tried to think steadily and dispassionately and to understand it all. At first there was too much excitement for consecutive thought to be possible, but this gradually subsided, unconsciously soothed by the monotonous splash of the waves as the steamer dashed

through them, and Alice's mind was soon again under her own control, though in a painful state of agitation, with an undefined dread of what was still before her.

She had made the disclosure which it had cost her such a struggle to acknowledge that it was her duty to make, but the result was widely different from anything she had foreseen. Colonel Myddleton decidedly rejected all idea of making any advances towards a reconciliation with his wife on the strength of this discovery, and desired above everything to be spared from holding any personal communication with one whom he not only considered to have behaved quite unjustifiably towards himself in the past, but whom he now described as 'the sort of woman whom he particularly detested.'

Alice recalled the tone and look with which these words had been spoken with a thrill of triumphant pleasure. She need

fear no rival in Madame d'Yffiniac ; he would not accept such happiness in married life as her hands could bestow ; and for a time there was comfort in the conviction that it was so. But Alice could never rest long in a state of blissful content founded on false reasoning or self-deception in any form, and she very soon felt the inevitable reaction from her first exultation. A sickening sense of shame began to creep over her as she slowly took in the truth that she was thus savagely rejoicing because, under an impulse of passionate anger, the friend whom she loved and revered above all others was taking a course quite unworthy of his natural justice and generosity ; and one which, in the case of any other person, he would have deprecated as culpably unreasonable.

To regret that his *first* feeling should have been utter repugnance to the prospect

of ever having any personal communication with his wife was impossible; but from wondering what his final decision *would* be, Alice gradually came to see more and more clearly what it *ought* to be, and found herself at last earnestly hoping that on reflection he would change his mind and be true to the noble unselfish sense of duty for which she had always honoured him beyond measure.

Alice scarcely knew how time was passing. It grew gradually darker and darker, star after star sparkled in the unclouded sky, and one by one most of the passengers went below; for the night, being clear, was cold. Here and there a motionless figure was stretched on one of the benches, or on the deck, under a mass of rugs and wrappings; but these were all either asleep or too much afraid of being ill to move or speak, and the only signs of life around

her came from the sailors in charge of the boat as they went through their necessary work.

The captain going his rounds came near enough to see that Alice was quite awake, and remarked that it was a fine night, to which she assented. He asked if she was comfortable, and told her that the moon would soon be up, pointing as he spoke to a faint light showing above the horizon. As the nearest approach to the question which she did not like to ask, Alice expressed her surprise that none of the passengers should apparently care to enjoy the beauty of such a night on deck.

The man laughed, and said it was few of his passengers that ever thought much of enjoying the voyage; but he added that to-night one or two gentlemen were smoking, 'forward,' and seemed all right, though the wind was freshening a little. Then he

went off to his duty on the bridge again, and Alice, drawing her furs more closely round her, resumed her silent watch.

Was Roger Myddleton one of the gentlemen reported to be smoking 'forward'? She felt certain that he must be, for she did not think him likely to be ill, still less to be sleepy. If he were there, would he come back to her? and when he came, what would he say? Her longing to see and speak with him became almost feverishly eager, and yet she dreaded to hear the sound of his step approaching her. He came at last and stood beside her.

'I wondered if you were still here,' he said. 'Are you not afraid of a chill?'

'Not in the least; and I shall stay quietly here for the night,' she replied.

'We are lucky,' he said. 'A more lovely night there could not be; and what little wind there is, is favourable to us. We shall

not run much risk of missing the early London train.'

Alice at that moment cared very little either about the beauty of the night or the punctuality of their arrival at Southampton.

'I have been hoping that you would come to me,' she said, summoning all her courage to aid her in breaking the ice. 'As soon as I get home I must write to Barbe, and I must know what I may say.'

'You have an undoubted right to say whatever you like,' answered Colonel Myddleton, rather stiffly; 'but I should be glad to find that you were willing to let all this pass without notice of any kind—to keep it, in fact, a secret known only to yourself and to me.'

'But how can I do that?' exclaimed Alice. 'I can never again feel the same

towards her now that I know how she has deceived me, and I cannot expect her to acquiesce in the change without some explanation.'

'That is true,' was the reply. 'Then can you not tell her of your own knowledge of the truth without letting her suspect that you have passed, or intend to pass, it on to me?'

'Yes; I could do that. And if you desire me to do so, I will. I shall be sorry, I confess; though perhaps I have no right to express even so much of an opinion as that.'

'You know that you have every right,' he answered quickly. 'But why should you be sorry? If she does not suspect that I know who she is, everything can go on as it has done all these years; whereas if she knows that I am aware of her identity, that could not be. I must

then insist on having the marriage acknowledged, and a regular legal separation arranged by our solicitors. What would be gained by that, except to make our unfortunate story a tit-bit of gossip to all our acquaintance?"

'But you need not necessarily do that,' said Alice boldly, though with a little hesitation. 'If you were to see her yourself——'

'See her! *Never!*' he exclaimed. 'If there is one thing more abhorrent to me than another, it is such a scene of recrimination as that would be.'

'I do not suppose such a meeting could be otherwise than painful on both sides,' said Alice. 'But no explanation between you will ever be worth anything unless you do meet. You will never get at the truth through any third person.'

'I have no wish to get at more of the

truth than is obvious to anybody who knows the facts,' replied Colonel Myddleton. 'In my opinion things had better go on as they are; but if I am ever obliged to do anything, it will certainly be done as a matter of business through my solicitor.'

Alice had not quite courage to protest except by silence. That, however, spoke plainly enough; and after a short pause Colonel Myddleton said rather impatiently:

'You differ from me, I see. What is it that you wish me to do?'

'I fancied you would have thought it right to give her at least the chance of excusing herself.'

'What possible excuse can she have to give? And why has she not given it long ago?'

'That I do not know—neither do you,' answered Alice; 'and I think you ought to

know before you decide so irrevocably against her.'

'There is no for or against in the case,' said Colonel Myddleton. 'She chose the terms on which she wished that we should be—I acquiesce—and there is an end of it.'

'But ought you not rather to dictate the terms *you* think right?'

'She prevented me from doing so years ago; now I do not see that I could improve on hers.'

Again Alice took refuge in an expressive silence; and this time Colonel Myddleton turned away and left her without protesting against it. He did not, however, go out of sight as he had done before; he paced the deck at some little distance from her, and Alice waited, sure that he would return in time, and nerving herself for the further discussion that would surely follow.

She understood that he was now going through much the same sort of struggle which for three days she had found so exhausting, and in which the thought of him had guided her to victory over herself.

She dimly guessed that the stronger passions and more unyielding will of a man's nature must make the struggle more severe, though probably shorter; and carried away by the unselfish part of her love for him, she threw all the force of her spirit into the longing to see him once more master of himself, and acting under the influence of conscience unswayed by mere personal feeling.

'It is probably the last time that I can ever be anything to him,' she thought; 'but if I may only be his good angel now and help him to be true to himself—to prove that he is just and generous and self-

devoted—I shall be content, and shall rejoice if he is happy, even without me, as I feel sure that he will be.'

It was an overwrought state of mind, scarcely natural, and would surely have to be dearly paid for afterwards, but it helped Alice through these darkest hours of her life as nothing else could have done.

At the end of nearly an hour Colonel Myddleton prolonged his walk to where Alice was sitting, and once more stood beside her. Her heart beat too fast to allow her to speak for a moment, but at the sound of his voice a strange calm came over her; she had need of all her strength, but she felt that it would not fail her.

'I make no apology for disturbing you,' he said. 'There can be no rest for either of us till this is settled one way or another. Tell me frankly what you think I ought

to do. I will not rush off so rudely again.'

'I hope that you will see her and learn direct from herself the story of the last twelve years from *her* point of view,' was Alice's instant reply, spoken firmly and distinctly, though in a low voice.

'And supposing that pleasant ordeal gone through—what next?' he asked almost roughly.

'That *must* depend on what you hear—and what that may be, as you know, I can only guess; but I hope that you may find it possible—that you may see your way to——' and then she stopped.

'Are you suggesting that I ought to forget and forgive the whole of the past?' asked Colonel Myddleton indignantly. 'If *you* can try to persuade me that I am to entreat her at last to do me the honour of taking her place as my wife, I can only say

that you don't know what you are talking about.'

'I think I do,' said Alice, almost in a whisper; and then leaning forward and looking up at him so as to compel his attention, she went on: 'I found all this out last Sunday; but it was not till a very few hours ago that I finally made up my mind to write and tell you about it. I knew all the time that I *ought*, but my resolution was tossed about like a shuttlecock by feelings I could not control, for I had no doubt that when once you knew the truth you would think it right to be reconciled to her. I could not endure the thought of it; but gradually I found that I could still less endure to be false to the principles which I owed entirely to your teaching. Your influence has compelled me to do right; but it took me three days to fight my way to strength to obey it, and therefore you must

believe that I *do* know what I am talking about when I urge you to go and see her—with the intention of condoning the past if you find that she wishes it.'

The frank confession, made so earnestly and simply as to bear no trace of lacking rectitude or womanly dignity, touched Colonel Myddleton deeply, and restored him to himself more than anything else could have done.

'I believe you are right,' he said, after a pause. 'Right at least so far as that I ought to see her and hear what she has to say for herself. As to anything further—let us hope that she will wish as little as I do to try such an experiment. We should only make each other more wretched if we tried to live together than we must be even with the privilege of living apart.'

'You do not know her as I do,' said Alice. 'She behaved very ill to you ; but of one thing I am sure—she loved you then, and

she loves you still, and the love of such a nature is not a thing to be despised.'

'And supposing that I could bring myself to do what you suggest,' replied Colonel Myddleton, 'what would her pride say to such an offer from me *now*?—would it not be far more humiliating than it was when she rejected it so contemptuously many years ago?'

'She is older and wiser now.'

'So am I. And as my wisdom tells me that married life must be either heaven or hell, I shall keep clear of it. Heaven in this case it most certainly could never be.'

'I only ask you to see her and to suspend your judgment until you have heard her own version of her conduct.'

'But even if I force myself to do that,' he said, 'you must not expect that anything she can say will affect my judgment

of more than the *past*. Nothing can influence me as to the future. Her theories and principles, her whole tone of thought and feeling, as revealed in her books, though it may excite interest in the *authoress*, would be abhorrent to me in my wife.'

'But I remember your once making me very indignant by saying that you had taken the impression that her theories had only grown out of a determination to justify to herself some step of her own which she nevertheless felt to have been a false one, and that therefore she had not even the merit of being true to her own convictions; and if that is so, of course it alters the case.'

'It may alter the case, but I cannot see that it mends it. If a woman chooses to act a part I would rather that she acted a good one.'

'That is not like you,' said Alice boldly,

‘for it is unreasonable. It *does* mend the case very much, as well as alter it; for when once that false step has been virtually retracted, and she lives under the constant influence of a man whom she loves and respects, will not all that is wrong and unreal in those theories gradually melt away?’

Colonel Myddleton did not answer immediately; he moved a little away and stood silently looking out over the moon-lit sea, and Alice was once more left to endure one of those intervals of suspense and emotion which seemed to try all her powers to the utmost.

At last he turned again towards her and spoke, but both voice and manner showed that the signs of a softening mood had passed away.

‘The more I think it all over,’ he said, ‘the more sure I feel that by far the best

plan for us all would be to let things simply rest in peace as they have now done for so long. But if you dislike being a party to keeping such a secret, I would not on any account ask you to do it, and when you have told her your story, I will take care to have the marriage acknowledged and proper arrangements made between us. Anything further is out of the question. I can never forgive her or be in charity with her ; and that being so, our meeting could do no good, while it must be intolerable to us both.'

'I am sorry,' Alice answered gravely ; 'but if that is your final decision, I agree with you that it will be better to say nothing about the matter to anyone—not even to her. Rather than cause you both such useless pain, I will keep my knowledge of the truth to myself.'

'But you will do it unwillingly—and I

see that you blame me. Can you not see that what you ask is impossible, Alice? I should have thought that *you* would know that I *could* not do what you suggest.'

The colour rose in Alice's face for a moment, and then faded again, leaving her deadly pale.

'I can believe that it would be hard at first,' she said; 'but as after all she is your wife, it seemed to me that it would be right to try. I have, however, no business to interfere or to criticise your judgment, and we had better say no more about it. As far as my share in the matter goes, I will take care to do exactly as you wish.'

'You are incomprehensible!' he exclaimed, almost angrily. 'You seem really to wish that I should take that woman to be my wife—and yet you *know*——'

'And it is *because* I know, that I do really

wish it,' interrupted Alice, looking up at him with her eyes suddenly dimmed with tears. 'I believe that *in the end* she would make your life bright and happy, and I care very much for that.'

Her voice shook, and she stopped for a second; then with an effort she recovered her self-control, and added with a smile, in which there was more pathos than there often is in tears :

'Can you not believe that since the fates have decreed that I may not try my own hand at it, I would rather see it done by another than left undone? But the thing I care for most of all—the one most precious comfort which I pray may never be taken from me as long as I live—is to be able to think of you as sure, at all times and under all circumstances, to take the course which you feel to be the wisest and noblest and best. What in

this case that may be, is not for me to decide.

She had spoken earnestly, in a tone of almost passionate entreaty—and without a thought of how much of her own feelings she was revealing by such words ; but the silence which followed them inevitably brought a full and embarrassing consciousness of their real meaning, and she was unspeakably thankful when, after a moment's hesitation, Colonel Myddleton left her without answering, and this time disappeared from her sight.

Alice was too much exhausted to think with any definite purpose when thus left alone, and spent the rest of the night in a sort of waking dream, conscious only of a longing, which became an almost continuous though inarticulate prayer, that the decision which she knew must sooner or later be made might be that which she

believed to be the right one. She could understand only too well the hard struggle needed for self-conquest, but she could know no peace till she was assured that the victory was won, though she would not allow herself to doubt that it was but a question of time.





CHAPTER X.

MR. BRANDON had suddenly sent Cuthbert Vaughan up to London just about this time, a proceeding which somewhat puzzled him, for he was perfectly well aware that the business on which he was ostensibly sent could have been quite as easily settled by letter. When, therefore, he received a note desiring him to delay his return home and to go to Southampton to meet Alice on her arrival there, and bring her down to Earnscliffe, he understood that this had

from the beginning been the object of his journey. He was by no means certain of the wisdom of the step, but to object was impossible; and as he felt that it would be a great pleasure to himself to see Alice so soon again, while she could not hold him responsible for what she might consider the 'fussiness' of the arrangement, he obeyed very willingly.

Having slept at Southampton, Cuthbert was on the quay in the early morning as the steamer approached, and soon made out Alice and her maid busily collecting and arranging all their belongings. Alice was far too well trained a woman of business to allow her personal troubles to interfere with the practical work of life, and she had been on the alert in good time to rouse her maid (who had come to life during the quiet progress up the smooth Southampton Water), and to get every-

thing ready to go on shore as quickly as possible.

Not expecting that anyone would meet her she scarcely looked at the people waiting on the quay, and did not see Cuthbert. Her mind was indeed chiefly occupied in wondering how soon Colonel Myddleton would come to her—for that he would come she had no doubt whatever—and what he would say when he came.

Cuthbert, standing unnoticed on the quay, saw to his surprise, and rather to his dismay, the man whom he believed to be his only dangerous rival make his way through the little crowd of assembling passengers to where Alice stood. He could not hear what was said, but the greeting on both sides showed that it was their first meeting that morning, though it showed also that they were quite aware of being fellow-passengers.

Cuthbert had supposed Colonel Myddleton to be at Brianskirk, where he had quite recently seen him, and he thought it odd that he should happen thus to be crossing from St. Mâlo to Southampton with Alice. He would not, however, have been sorry to have been an unrecognised spectator for a few minutes, and to have observed their manner to each other; but the maid caught sight of him, and pointed him out to Alice immediately, and the opportunity was lost.

When Mr. Brandon and Alice had first returned from Madeira, Cuthbert had met them in London, and had been with them there until they went to Germany. There was therefore nothing special in their present meeting, and Alice's first words to Cuthbert as she stepped on shore were pretty much what he had been expecting.

‘What in the world brings *you* here, Cuthbert?’

‘I have been in London on business for a day or two,’ he replied, ‘and had a note yesterday from your father with directions to meet you here this morning and escort you home.’

‘How absurd to give you so much unnecessary trouble!’ cried Alice a little impatiently. ‘You might just as well have met me in London. Marryatt and I can quite take care of ourselves.’

‘I did not doubt it,’ replied Cuthbert; ‘but you know that your father always chooses to have his orders obeyed to the letter, so of course I came down.’

‘Oh, of course, you had no choice,’ said Alice; ‘and it is all the nicer for me, only you need not have had the trouble. I suppose we have not much time to lose.’

‘You are in so early that there is plenty

of time. I have brought a man from the hotel who will see Marryatt through the Custom House and bring her to join you again. You must come and have some breakfast at once.'

Colonel Myddleton spoke hastily in answer to Alice's glance towards him.

'You are in such good hands now, Miss Brandon, that I can evidently be of no further use, and I must look after my own belongings.'

'If you are going down to Brianskirk, we shall be fellow-travellers all day,' said Cuthbert, feeling somehow that Alice was disinclined to speak, and that courtesy required that something of the sort should be said.

'I do not go north at present,' replied Colonel Myddleton; 'and as I have business in the town here I shall not get away by your train. I shall only see you off.'

After this they all went their separate ways, and did not meet again. Just before the London train started, a commissionaire brought a note to Alice. She was alone at the moment, for after taking her to her seat, Cuthbert had gone to look after Marryatt and the 'luggage. The note was very short.

‘You are right, and I owe you much for making me see it. I am going back by the next boat. The result you shall hear. Meanwhile, as I cannot be of service to you now that you are in Vaughan’s care, I think we had better not meet.

‘R. M.’

‘Myddleton has missed us,’ said Cuthbert, as he took his seat and the train started.

‘Seeing people off is a delusion,’ said

Alice. 'Why should he leave his breakfast just to look at us settling ourselves for a journey?'

And then leaning back in her corner, she closed her eyes as if she intended to go to sleep. There was nothing ungracious in her doing so, for they had already been together for at least an hour, and had talked over various bits of home news, neither was there anything strange in an avowed wish for rest and sleep after a night's voyage ; but Cuthbert nevertheless watched her with some anxiety from behind his newspaper.

She was certainly looking better and stronger than she had done when he had seen her in London some weeks ago ; but she was not as much like herself as he had hoped to find her after her long visit to Madame d'Yffiniac. She looked pale and worn, far from vigorous enough to bear

fresh worries with impunity ; and yet it would not be easy to save her from them, unless indeed she should prove willing to give him, before long, the right to protect her from every form of trouble.

That consent would in itself at once put a stop to the sort of antagonism between her and her father, which would be more wearing to her than anything else, and which Cuthbert feared could be averted in no other way, for Mr. Brandon was now determined to lose no time in urging her to carry out his plans for her future.

That Alice knew, or at any rate guessed, what her father's wishes were, Cuthbert did not doubt ; but he felt utterly in the dark as to her own feelings and intentions in the matter. He knew that she and Colonel Myddleton had not met (until now) since the sudden parting which had so much affected her spirits a year ago. He had

easily ascertained that this meeting on board the steamer had been purely accidental, unexpected on both sides ; and it was evident that Colonel Myddleton had no desire to make more of it than was inevitable, or to pay Alice more attention than common courtesy made indispensable. That being so, was it possible that her former feeling for him was still so strong that this casual meeting had been almost too much for her ?

It was not a pleasant thought ; but she must know now, beyond all possibility of doubt, that she was wasting her affection, and Cuthbert had been patient and hopeless too long to become suddenly unreasonable when at last he saw some ground for hope. He felt almost sure that he should win her in the end if only Mr. Brandon could be prevented from exercising a pressure which nothing could justify in any case, and which,

with a girl of Alice's nature, might be fatally impolitic.

After a time Alice roused herself and began to talk. She would have been glad to have been alone during the journey after such an exhausting night as that just over ; but she also felt that it would be better for her not to allow herself to dwell incessantly on a subject which could only torture her, and there was something soothing in Cuthbert's unobtrusive care and consideration. They had so many interests in common now, that conversation was easy and was soon even interesting, though Alice could never quite free herself from an under-current of preoccupation, and knew that until she had heard from Quimperlé, which could not be for several days, she should know no real peace.

She had still before her the task of writing to Madame d'Yffiniac, but she had

made up her mind not to do so until she was at Earnscliffe, as then her note would be received after Colonel Myddleton's arrival instead of before it; and she believed that it would be by far the best for them to meet without any preparation on Madame d'Yffiniac's side. She really thought that if once the beginning were over they might have a very fair chance of happiness together, and she trusted that she should be able to find comfort for herself in the knowledge that if he were happy she had helped to make him so. As for her own future—the less she could think about it the better. While she had life and health she was sure to find abundant work to do in the position which could scarcely fail to be hers, and in fulfilling the task assigned to her to the best of her power she knew that she should find peace if not joy, and with that she must be content.

It was very late when Alice and Cuthbert

reached Earnscliffe. She was by that time so tired that she gladly went to her room at once, and she was in such obvious need of rest that Mr. Brandon did not attempt to detain her. Cuthbert was glad of the chance of entering an immediate and private protest against undue haste in forcing new plans upon her, which was given him when Mr. Brandon observed with a laugh:

‘You did not guess what I was really sending you to London for. I saw that. But the settlement with those Greenwoods was a good excuse, and I thought I would give you a friendly push.’

‘It was a very kind thought, and I gladly availed myself of it,’ replied Cuthbert. ‘But seriously, sir, I believe that much of that sort of thing would do more harm than good. Alice will not bear to be hurried, I can see.’

‘Hurried!’ said Mr. Brandon. ‘Stuff and nonsense, Cuthbert! She must have seen what we both wish, and I am sure she has had time enough to consider it all and know her own mind. Don’t you stand any airs of that sort.’

Cuthbert flushed more deeply than Mr. Brandon had ever seen him do before, and answered quickly:

‘I am afraid there was more to consider than you thought of, sir, and that her needing time has been only too natural.’

‘You mean that she liked somebody else?’ said Mr. Brandon bluntly. ‘Why, she refused St. Aubyn!’

‘Not for *my* sake,’ replied Cuthbert.

‘For whose, then?’ asked Mr. Brandon sharply.

‘I know nothing, and I would rather not speak from mere conjecture,’ said Cuthbert;

‘but I could not love her so well and not see last year that she had some attachment which she felt it necessary to conquer. It is all guess-work on my part, for I have never been in her confidence, and, as you know, we then led such different lives that I had little opportunity for observing her; but of the fact I have no doubt whatever, though nothing but necessity would have made me tell you so. If you will give me time, I have every hope that Alice will before very long willingly consent to give herself to me; but if you hurry her, or force me to hurry her, to a decision before old wounds are healed, you will take away all chance of her ever doing so. I ask you to believe that I know her thoroughly and to leave it to me. Surely you need not doubt that I shall do my utmost to win her, and to do it, too, as soon as is possible.’

‘Well! Take your own way,’ growled Mr. Brandon. ‘You ought to know best; and of course if the girl has had some silly fancy it may take you a little while to drive it out of her head. You don’t know who it was, I think you said?’

‘I was scarcely ever with her in society,’ was the evasive reply, ‘and I never even heard the names of half her acquaintance in those days.’

‘Well! It does not matter,’ was the cool comment. ‘She is not the girl to carry anything on underhand, and so of course we know that it came to nothing, and that the field is clear for you now. I will not meddle, only remember that I detest all dawdling, and that a girl like Alice will certainly prefer a man who makes up his mind to be her master to one who lets himself be made her slave.’

‘I don’t think any such question will

ever have to be settled between Alice and me,' answered Cuthbert. 'And as to dawdling, your patience shall not be more tried than I can help.'

And with this the subject was dropped.

While Alice's devoted champion was thus securing peace and quiet for her for a while at any rate, she was herself writing her note to Madame d'Yffiniac before going to bed, being determined to begin the next day without any painful task awaiting her. It was not an easy letter to write, especially with the hampering consciousness that it would in all probability be seen by Colonel Myddleton. At last it stood thus:

'You know by this time all that otherwise I must have explained, and perhaps you will accuse me of having treated you unfairly in betraying a secret which I found out accidentally, and without even warning

you that I meant to do so. It seemed to me that the secret was not really your own, and that your husband had a right to know it. I did what I believed to be right, and I hope and trust that what I have done will be for your happiness and his; in which case you will have no difficulty in forgiving me for taking such responsibility on myself.

‘ALICE.’

She could not bring herself to say more, for while she was determined to utter no word of reproach, she felt that it was equally impossible to excuse or to forgive the past. Bald and unsatisfactory as it was, therefore, this note must go, and she must wait with what patience she could command until she should hear from both husband and wife something of what passed between them. Fortunately for her health of both

body and mind Alice found herself for the next few days so incessantly occupied with work and claims of all kinds that she could rarely dwell long on what seemed to her, nevertheless, the one only important and absorbing interest in the world; and though she suffered, she certainly suffered less acutely than she would have done had Mr. Brandon been less exacting in his demands on her time and attention.

Colonel Myddleton had meanwhile returned as quickly as possible to Quimperlé. He had made up his mind to what he recognised to be a duty; but every hour that passed only made that duty seem more distasteful. Everything that Alice had said or done or looked in the matter had tended to strengthen his love and admiration for her, and to increase his repugnance to encountering his wife. When he had known Marion, thirteen years ago now, she

was a tall, slight girl, handsome and clever, and full of animation; but though he had then believed in her love for himself, there had been something wanting which had prevented her from winning his affection. He had liked and admired her; she had amused and interested him; and finally he had pitied her from his heart. But he had never been really in love with her. Had she at once taken and kept her place as his wife, with her brilliant powers and her intense affection for him, he would probably soon have loved her, for she had then no rival; but now, haunted by Alice's eyes and voice, he could not feel kindly disposed towards Marion. He intended honestly to do his best to bring about a reconciliation, but he knew that it would be a great relief to him if his overtures were peremptorily rejected.

As he walked up from his hotel to

Madame d'Yffiniac's cottage, he tried to imagine the sort of woman he should find. He knew by reputation, and by the one glimpse he had had of her when she was travelling with the Chaloners, that she was what people called a 'fine woman,' and he did not like 'fine women'—with manners and opinions to match their physical proportions. The last thing he would have chosen would be to marry such a woman as she must be now after years of independent foreign artistic life, so utterly unlike a quiet, well-bred Englishwoman. He devoutly hoped that she might be too completely wedded to that independence to resign it.

On reaching the cottage Colonel Myddleton found that its mistress was at home ; and giving his name, he followed the servant into the studio adjoining the little *salon*. Old Jeanne, however, found 'Myddleton'

beyond her powers of pronunciation, and simply announced '*un monsieur anglais pour madame.*'

Madame d'Yffiniac came forward from behind a large easel, with a momentary dread of seeing Mr. Annesley Mainwaring, and finding that he had not been effectually suppressed by her avoidance of him the previous week. She was wearing a painting blouse of coarse brown holland over her black dress, and a handkerchief of black Spanish lace was loosely tied over her hair, while she had a palette in one hand and a brush in the other. It was her usual studio costume, and was by no means unbecoming ; but it was singularly ill-calculated to find favour in the eyes now critically regarding her, for it was an outward and visible sign of that part of her life which was most opposed to all his prejudices.

‘Roger!’ she exclaimed, after the first moment of breathless astonishment, and her voice was steady, though she was very white.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘You have managed to hide yourself well all these years, but now that I have found you I suppose I need scarcely apologise for coming to ask you a few questions?’

‘How did you guess who I was?’ she asked rather defiantly.

‘I did not guess,’ he replied. ‘Last Sunday Alice Brandon found a sketch of mine in an old book of yours. This betrayed your secret to her, and she very properly told it to me as soon as she could.’

‘She knew our story, then?’

‘She knew *mine*, but she did not connect it with *yours* until this sketch left her no room for doubt; for it not only had my

signature, but was a view of a part of the grounds at Brianskirk.'

Madame d'Yffiniac's colour came and went rapidly.

'And she has sent you here to reproach me! She made sure of revenge for the want of confidence in her which I suppose she resented!'

'She sent me here, undoubtedly,' was the quick, stern reply. 'She persuaded me—convinced me—that I ought to come here at once, to learn from yourself the whole truth as to the past, and then to consider with you what is to be done in the future. Marion! what could induce you to leave me in that way—and why would you yield to no appeal to return?'

Marion struggled hard to rival his composure.

'We cannot talk here,' she said hurriedly.

‘Go into the *salon* and wait for me. I will come to you there in a moment.’

He promptly obeyed, for he hated ‘scenes,’ and he saw that she was on the verge of breaking down from the effect of so sudden a shock.

In a very few minutes she came to him, having taken off her blouse and put on her cap, and transformed herself from a working artist into a daintily and fashionably dressed lady.

‘Ask what questions you please, and I will answer them,’ she said. ‘I admit your right.’

‘I want to know how you justify the step you took directly after our marriage?’

‘I shall not attempt to deny that it was conventionally unjustifiable,’ she replied; ‘but nothing would have induced me to

remain with you as your wife after I knew by your own written avowal——'

'Which you ought never to have seen,' interrupted Colonel Myddleton.

'True. It was a mean piece of treachery on your sister's part, for which you were in no way responsible. It was fortunate for us both, however, that she *did* send me that letter, and that I could act upon it at once. It would all have been more difficult and disagreeable when I found out the truth later, as I must have done before long.'

'As you would never have done, I hope and believe. Why should you have felt it impossible to stay with me? If that letter told you that I was not madly in love with you—that I was not blind to the drawbacks to an early and imprudent marriage—it must have told you also that my affection for you was strong enough to make me

deliberately decide that the reasons in favour of our marriage overweighed those against it. What unpardonable offence was there in that? I had every ground for thinking that we could be happy together.'

'That is to say you pitied me for my poverty and loneliness, and you believed that your calm and kindly "affection" for me was returned by *my* being "madly in love" with *you*.'

'Marion!' exclaimed Colonel Myddleton reproachfully, and with obvious annoyance and embarrassment.

'I shall not deny it,' Marion went on hastily. 'It was quite true. But till I saw that letter it had never occurred to me either that you felt only compassion for me, or that your marriage with me could be a serious injury to your prospects in life. The truth was a terrible shock. You meant

well, I never doubted that ; but did it never occur to you that to dupe a girl who loved you, and to whom you were indifferent, into marrying you for her own good was to place her in the most cruel and humiliating position conceivable? And as to my not finding out the truth ! Roger—can you think it possible that a week of life together would not infallibly have shown me the difference between my feeling for you and yours for me? To me such a life would have been worse than death.'

'I saw and felt all that too late,' replied Colonel Myddleton. 'What I had tried to do for you was ill judged, and I could understand and excuse your first hasty flight ; but however hard you might feel it to have been placed without the power of choice in such a position, did it never occur to *you* that the revenge you took was unjust and unwomanly?'

‘I was no loss to you, I knew that,’ she answered bitterly.

‘And granting that you were not—which however I by no means allow—you were hardly ignorant or childish enough not to know the intense, almost maddening, anxiety I could not but feel about you, when all that I knew for months was that a beautiful penniless girl, with little experience and not much self-control, had thrown herself on the world without protection of any kind. Marion! it was an utterly unjustifiable thing to do, merely to gratify your own pride and self-will.’

‘And do you think I have not known that for years?’ she cried, with a choking struggle to speak calmly. ‘For years I would have given worlds to undo what I had done; but after I had answered your advertisement as I did, I had cut myself off from all chance of your forgiveness.’

‘And why did you answer it in that way?’

She flushed deeply.

‘You may as well know the whole of my folly. Partly because I was too proud to own that I had been wrong—still too sore-hearted to feel it possible to submit—and partly because I was such an utter idiot, such a vain fool, as to have set my heart on winning name and fame, and then meeting you and forcing you to own my power, on making you love me in spite of yourself.’

‘Name and fame are not what one seeks in one’s wife,’ said Colonel Myddleton drily.

‘Do you think I need to be told that now?’ cried Marion passionately. ‘I have long known that when I wrote that answer to your appeals to me I virtually with my own hands closed against myself the door to my one chance of happiness; and being

of a nature that struggles hard against every form of humiliation, I have resolutely set myself to carry it off with a high hand, and have devoted all my powers to proving to myself that I had done well and wisely. I have failed. The last few months have gradually shown me up to myself, though I have never owned it even in my heart until now, and you need wish me no worse punishment. If I have spoiled your life, I have ruined my own ; but unavailing regret now cannot undo the past, though possibly it may help to earn me some small measure of forgiveness before we part.'

Marion's vehemence, even in self-reproach, jarred on Colonel Myddleton's taste, and contrasted painfully with Alice's gentle reticence ; but he felt that it was genuine and was therefore not to be despised, while the frank avowal of her passionate affection for himself could not fail to soften his mood

towards her to some extent. There was nothing to be gained by reproaching her further ; indeed, it would have been impossible to him to say another word to add to her self-abasement. It was quite evident what must be his course with regard to her, and it was not in him to give a woman useless pain, or to pardon grudgingly if he pardoned at all.

‘Of our parting again now there need be no question, unless it is *your* wish that we should do so,’ he said gravely. ‘The home I offered you so long ago is open to you now, as it was then, if you care to take it; and I will do what I can to make your life with me a happy one. That it will be more difficult to us both to fit ourselves into each other’s life now than it would have been years ago you must see as clearly as I do; but if you are ready to meet me truly and loyally in forgetting

the past, and in making the best of the future, I think I can promise that you shall not repent it, and without doubt it is what we ought to do if we can feel it possible. Can you trust me, and can you trust yourself, to be as patient and forbearing as it would be absurd to pretend that we shall not need to be before we can learn really to understand each other? If you are willing to try, I am; but it must be done with our eyes open to all the difficulties before us, and under no romantic delusion that it will be all happiness to either of us in the beginning.'

Marion was very pale, and her voice was barely audible as she answered him:

'Can I trust you? For myself I should ask nothing better than to be allowed to prove to you the truth of all that I have said: but I am not utterly selfish, Roger, whatever you may think; and just because

I know that you are capable of the utmost stretch of self-sacrifice, I feel that I ought not to let you make it for me. There will be no hardship for *me* in what you are proposing, but for *you*——'

'For myself, I counted the cost before I came to you,' he said, not unkindly, 'and we need not compare notes on that point, I think. The best thing for us both to do now, Marion, is to remember that if we each do our part honourably and dutifully, we may very much lessen the cost which we must both pay for our mistakes in the past.'

She understood the interruption, and the grave decision with which he closed that part of the discussion. Alice Brandon must not yet be named between them.

She understood, too, that though she might confidently rely on receiving from him the utmost courtesy and kindness and

consideration, all expression of excited feeling on her part was annoying to him.

She was right. He could not respond to it, and would not pretend that he could; while either to listen in silence or to repress it was equally distasteful to him. In truth, the passionate devotion which it was in her nature to give had far less attraction for him than the soft womanly tenderness and self-forgetfulness in which she had always been deficient, but which it was to be hoped she might learn at last, when all the strength of her nature should be thrown into the endeavour to atone for the past, and win first his full forgiveness and afterwards his love and confidence, by proving herself not only worthy of them but capable of waiting patiently and submissively till they came to her.

The scene had been almost equally trying to both, and seeing that she was for the

time incapable of further self-control, and shrinking indescribably from witnessing the outbreak of emotion which he felt that another word would bring, he hastily escaped.

‘We shall both be better alone for a while,’ he said, as he went away. ‘I will come back in an hour, and then we shall have much to discuss and arrange.’





CHAPTER XI.

DAY after day passed until Alice had been at home for more than a week, and all that she had heard from Quimperlé was one short note from Marion, which practically told her nothing that she had not felt fully assured of before.

‘DEAREST ALICE,

‘That I owe you the fullest explanation that could be given, I admit; but as yet I *cannot* write of all that has happened in this last few hours. I can

only entreat you to believe that you shall never have cause to repent your own generous part in bringing it about, and assure you that I will atone for the past by making him happy if it is in my power to do it. Forgive me, and try not to hate me.

‘MARION MYDDLETON.’

Alice longed with feverish impatience to know more than this implied. She had fancied that Colonel Myddleton would have written to her, and she felt as if he ought to have done so, though she quite saw how difficult it would have been. She could do nothing but bear the suspense as best she might in silence, dreading the time when it must all be made public, and wondering how such an announcement would be made—what their plans would be; what people would say; in fact, dwelling in every leisure moment on this one subject in each variety

of form that her imagination suggested to her for her constant torment.

At last one morning not long after breakfast Alice was surprised and delighted by a summons to receive Lady Elizabeth Randolph, whom she had not yet seen since her return home.

‘How good of you to come so early!’ cried Alice, as she found herself greeted with the warmest affection.

‘I wanted to make sure of finding you,’ replied Lady Elizabeth, who was quite alone. ‘I should have come sooner, but I have been very much engaged the last day or two. And now that I am here, Alice, you must say “Not at home” to anyone else, for I have much to say.’

Alice rang instantly and gave the order, though with a changing colour and a beating heart, for something in Lady Elizabeth’s manner told her that she already knew all ;

and had come—probably by Colonel Myddleton's wish—to talk to her about it.

‘I see that you guess my errand,’ said Lady Elizabeth, as soon as they were left alone, ‘and as it is neither your way nor mine to beat about the bush when there is anything to be said, I shall give you this note at once. Roger Myddleton has been with us for the last two days, and is now gone on to Brianskirk to make arrangements for giving it up.’

Alice breathed a sigh of intense relief. She might have trusted him to spare her his wife's presence in the neighbourhood (which he was free to leave, though she was not), and have saved herself the pain of anticipating it. She opened the note which Lady Elizabeth placed in her hands, and turning away to a window, as the nearest approach to being alone, read it at once.

‘ I have asked Lady Elizabeth to tell you everything. I dare not trust myself to see you. Forgive me for all the trouble I have brought into your life, and believe that my most earnest prayer will always be for your happiness.

‘ R. M.’

After a few minutes’ silent struggle with herself for composure, Alice crossed the room to where Lady Elizabeth was turning over the books on the table so as to seem neither curious nor impatient, and put it into her hand, saying :

‘ He has told you all, then ?’

‘ He came to tell us his story, that we, as his oldest and nearest friends, might help him now to the right way of making the best of a bad business. But beyond the fact that the discovery of the truth came through you, he said nothing what-

ever about *you* to anyone but myself; and to me all that he said, as he gave me this note last night, was: "Will you give this for me to Alice Brandon, and tell her all that I have told you? I want her to know as much as she cares to know about us, and I must not see her." You must not mind my saying to you that of course I understood, and I am sure it will be better for you that we should speak frankly to each other.'

'I am glad that *you* should know,' Alice answered, 'for I know you will understand what it is to me, and how I long to know exactly how it has all been, and what is settled about it. Only don't pity me, for I could not bear it; and don't blame *him*, for I would not hear it.'

'I will tell you the facts without comments,' replied Lady Elizabeth kindly.

Roger, she said, had unexpectedly

arrived at Thornycroft two days ago, and had fortunately found the family party there alone. He had told them the whole story of his marriage, from the beginning until the present time, and had consulted them as to the best way of now making it public, which must, of course, be done as soon as possible. They had all agreed that there could be nothing gained by letting the old story be known at all. It must be contrived that it should pass as if the marriage took place at the present date. Roger had quite recently had the offer of a Colonial Governorship—such things, as Lady Elizabeth observed, being always more likely to come to those who did not need them—and though at the moment he had declined it, he had reason to believe that it was still open, as no other appointment had been announced. He had applied for permission to withdraw his

refusal, and as he had both merit and interest, he had been allowed to do so.

‘This settles things smoothly,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘We can easily manage that the Society papers—horrid as they are, they can be made useful sometimes—shall announce his intended marriage with “Madame d’Yffiniac” at the same time as they announce his appointment. Haste will be accounted for by his having to leave England so soon, and the world must be induced to imagine that as neither of them has anyone but themselves to consider, they have chosen to meet in London, and to be privately married there before they sail. Eccentricity of that sort will be thought quite the natural thing for a literary adventuress; and it will be supposed that *he* was probably conscious that his friends could not very cordially welcome such a choice.’

'*You* have planned it, and planned it well,' Alice said. 'I do not see how it could be managed better.'

'No, I think not,' was the reply. 'And sorry as one is to have him banished again, it is better so for a time. He must have work to help him through his troubles, and they will be better thrown completely on each other. When in a few years' time he brings her back among us, we may all be able to be decently civil to her, if she shows that she has learned to make him reasonably happy.'

'Try not to misjudge her more than you can help,' said Alice. 'Remember, dear Lady Elizabeth, that I know her very well, and have always loved her dearly; and though I don't defend her in this matter, I do honestly believe that she will make him a devoted wife now, and that half the trouble grew out of her loving him too

well to be able to endure the knowledge that he loved her less than she thought.'

Lady Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders.

'We won't argue that point, my dear. You are generous, and I am a prejudiced old woman—granted; but you will never persuade me to like the thing, and there is an end of it. No words can tell you how it has grieved me.'

'Will Mrs. Carr keep the secret? She knows it, though no one else does.'

'Roger thinks she will. He has seen her, and she is too anxious to keep her share in it from your uncle's knowledge to talk about it. Anyhow, that must take its chance.'

'Did you hear how Barte had managed to conceal herself so well?'

'Yes. She had a half-sister, Barbara—whose mother died at her birth. The father married again within the year, and came

back to Europe, leaving the child with some American relations, who brought her up and called her by their name of Fairfax. She married and lost her husband, and then came to join her father and sister; but died herself almost immediately. Roger had never heard of her existence, and as Marion had all her sister's papers and so on, she had no difficulty in personating her. She went at once to that Russian princess who had been Captain d'Yffiniac's godmother, and appealed to her as his widow for protection and employment. She was thus never in any doubtful position, and excited no suspicion. It was all very clever; but that *she* should be Roger's wife! Nothing will reconcile me to it.'

And then reference, kind and delicate, but straightforward, was made to Alice's own share in the story, for Lady Elizabeth rightly judged that the motherless girl

would be the better for having the sympathy and counsel of an older friend ; and Alice frankly told her all that there was to tell, including the fact of her own strange connection with the Radclyffe family.

‘ The spell could not be resisted, you see,’ she said, with a smile. ‘ I had seen the Lady’s Cross, so my fate was sealed, and “ Corbie’s Pool ” was the agent by which it was brought about. Nothing could be more complete !’

Lady Elizabeth answered gravely :

‘ This reconciles me to the destruction of the place with all its associations. Future generations are safe from such a trial of nerves and faith, and that is well. But Alice, my child, don’t let a sense of being doomed to sorrow take hold of you and weigh down your spirits. You have borne your troubles well and bravely, and believe

an old woman who has seen much of life, that happiness quite as real as what you had dreamed of for yourself is probably in store for you in some other form.'

Alice paused a moment to steady her voice before she said :

'But even if such happiness as I know you are thinking of should never come, you must not suppose that if I *could* I *would* blot the last year and a half out of my life. It has been hard to bear, but I know that sorrow has been my blessing, not my curse, for that through it alone I have learned the truths which now I prize above all else.'

THE END.



